

**CREATIVE NEGOTIATION  
WITHIN LOCAL ISLAMIC TRADITION:  
An Ethnography of the *Balimau* Tradition in Kuntu, Riau**



By  
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**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies of Sunan Kalijaga State  
Islamic University (UIN) Yogyakarta in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor in Islamic Studies

**YOGYAKARTA  
2025**



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Yogyakarta, 22nd December 2025  
SUNAN KALIJAGA  
YOGYAKARTA

On Behalf of The Rector  
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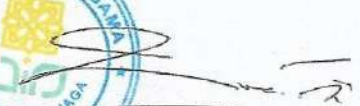
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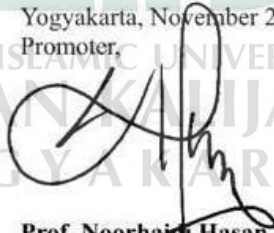
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition through an ethnographic analysis of the *Balimau* tradition in Kuntu village, Riau Province, Indonesia. When I first began researching this distinctive bathing ritual along the banks of the Subayang River in 2015, I was initially drawn to document what appeared to be a straightforward example of local Islamic practice. However, my sustained fieldwork from 2021 to 2024 revealed that this tradition, which had indeed begun as a simple ritual, had undergone complex transformations. The research became particularly compelling after reconstructing the pivotal 2017 controversy when religious authorities declared the tradition had deviated from proper Islamic practice.

The research explores how the Kuntu community navigated between religious orthodoxy and cultural preservation when their centuries-old tradition faced existential threats. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of local manuscripts, I documented the historical trajectory from simple purification practice to contested cultural tradition. The study reveals that tradition sustainability depends not merely on formal religious authorities but on complex negotiations involving all community members who possess social, political, or economic interests in traditional practices. The 2017 crisis became a watershed moment when youth organizers floated a symbolic coffin down the Subayang River with banners declaring “Tradition is Dead,” demonstrating how resistance operates through cultural mourning rather than direct theological confrontation.

My analysis introduces the concept of “creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition” to understand how communities maintain meaningful practices without directly confronting religious authority. I synthesize insights from three complementary theoretical perspectives: Lila Abu-Lughod’s concept of embedded resistance that operates within rather than against power structures, James Scott’s analysis of how ritual spaces become political arenas where meaning is contested, and Asef Bayat’s framework of quiet encroachment through gradual accumulation of small gains. This synthesis reveals that creative negotiation operates simultaneously through three interconnected mechanisms: embedded positioning within existing Islamic frameworks, political transformation of ritual meaning and

authority, and gradual non-confrontational advancement of cultural claims.

The ethnographic analysis demonstrates how these mechanisms functioned in practice during and after the 2017 crisis. Youth organizers never challenged religious authority directly or questioned Islamic legitimacy. Instead, they mourned tradition's death while emphasizing social bonds and constitutional rights, positioning themselves as cultural mourners rather than religious rebels. Their protest transformed the Subayang River into a political arena where competing claims about tradition, modernity, and Islamic authenticity were publicly contested. This episodic visible action formed part of a longer pattern of quiet persistence, as youth continued organizing, maintained community networks, and gradually reframed discourse from "Is this Islamic?" to "Is this our tradition?"

The findings demonstrate that Islamic traditions maintain vitality not through rigid orthodoxy but through productive tensions between competing interpretations. The *Balimau* case reveals how the principle of "*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah*" (custom based on Islamic law, Islamic law based on the Quran) serves not as a fixed formula but as a dynamic framework enabling creative adaptation. Both critics and defenders of *Balimau* positioned themselves as upholding this principle, demonstrating how diverse positions could coexist within a shared Islamic framework rather than unified orthodoxy. Multiple legitimate interpretations operate simultaneously within the same discursive framework, with religious authorities creating interpretive space through strategic incompleteness while cultural agents exploit this space through discursive innovation.

**Keywords:** *Balimau* Tradition, Local Islamic Tradition, Creative Negotiation, Cultural Preservation, Religious Orthodoxy

## INTISARI

Disertasi ini mengkaji negosiasi kreatif dalam tradisi Islam lokal melalui analisis etnografis terhadap tradisi *Balimau* di Desa Kuntu, Provinsi Riau, Indonesia. Ketika pertama kali saya mulai meneliti ritual mandi khas ini di tepi Sungai *Subayang* pada 2015, awalnya saya tertarik untuk mendokumentasikan apa yang tampak sebagai contoh sederhana dari praktik Islam lokal. Namun, riset lapangan yang saya lakukan secara intensif dari 2021 hingga 2024 mengungkapkan bahwa tradisi ini, yang memang dimulai sebagai ritual sederhana, telah mengalami transformasi yang kompleks. Penelitian ini menjadi semakin menarik setelah merekonstruksi kontroversi penting tahun 2017 ketika otoritas agama menyatakan tradisi tersebut telah menyimpang dari praktik Islam yang benar.

Penelitian ini menceritakan bagaimana komunitas Kuntu bergerak di antara ortodoksi agama dan klaim pelestarian budaya ketika tradisi mereka yang diceritakan telah berusia berabad-abad menghadapi ancaman eksistensial. Melalui observasi partisipan, wawancara mendalam, saya mendokumentasikan lintasan historis dari praktik penyucian sederhana menjadi tradisi budaya yang diperdebatkan. Studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa keberlanjutan tradisi tidak hanya bergantung pada otoritas agama formal, tetapi pada negosiasi kompleks yang melibatkan seluruh anggota komunitas yang memiliki kepentingan sosial, politik, atau ekonomi dalam praktik tradisional. Krisis 2017 menjadi momen penting ketika para pemuda penyelenggara menghanyutkan miniatur keranda di Sungai *Subayang* dengan spanduk bertuliskan "Tradisi Sudah Mati," yang menunjukkan bagaimana negosiasi beroperasi melalui ungkapan kesedihan kolektif atas hilangnya tradisi, bukan konfrontasi teologis langsung.

Analisis saya memperkenalkan konsep "negosiasi kreatif dalam tradisi Islam lokal" untuk memahami bagaimana komunitas mempertahankan praktik yang bermakna tanpa secara langsung menghadapi otoritas agama. Saya mensintesis tiga perspektif teoretis yang saling melengkapi: konsep resistensi tertanam Lila Abu-Lughod yang beroperasi di dalam, bukan melawan struktur kekuasaan; analisis James Scott tentang bagaimana ruang ritual menjadi arena politik tempat makna diperdebatkan; dan kerangka kerja Asef Bayat tentang perambahan senyap melalui akumulasi bertahap dari keuntungan-keuntungan kecil. Sintesis ini mengungkapkan bahwa



negosiasi kreatif beroperasi secara bersamaan melalui tiga mekanisme yang saling terkait: pemosisian tertanam dalam kerangka Islam yang ada, transformasi politik dari makna dan otoritas ritual, serta kemajuan bertahap atas klaim budaya tanpa konfrontasi.

Melalui analisis etnografis saya menunjukkan bagaimana mekanisme-mekanisme ini berfungsi selama dan setelah krisis 2017. Para pemuda penyelenggara tidak pernah menantang otoritas agama secara langsung atau mempertanyakan legitimasi Islam. Sebaliknya, mereka mengekspresikan duka atas kematian tradisi sambil menekankan ikatan sosial dan hak konstitusional, memposisikan diri mereka sebagai pelayat budaya, bukan pemberontak agama. Protes mereka mengubah Sungai *Subayang* menjadi arena politik tempat klaim-klaim yang bersaing tentang tradisi, modernitas, dan keaslian Islam diperdebatkan secara publik. Aksi yang terlihat ini merupakan bagian dari pola perlawanan tenang yang lebih panjang, karena para pemuda terus mengorganisir, mempertahankan jaringan komunitas, dan secara bertahap membingkai ulang wacana dari “Apakah ini Islami?” menjadi “Apakah ini tradisi kita?”

Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tradisi Islam mempertahankan vitalitas bukan melalui ortodoksi kaku tetapi melalui ketegangan produktif antara interpretasi-interpretasi yang bersaing. Kasus *Balimau* mengungkapkan bagaimana prinsip "*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah*" (adat bersendikan syarak, syarak bersendikan Kitabullah) berfungsi bukan sebagai formula tetap tetapi sebagai kerangka dinamis yang memungkinkan adaptasi kreatif. Baik pengkritik maupun pembela *Balimau* memposisikan diri mereka sebagai penegak prinsip ini, yang menunjukkan bagaimana posisi-posisi yang beragam dapat hidup berdampingan dalam kerangka Islam yang sama, bukan ortodoksi yang seragam. Berbagai interpretasi yang sah beroperasi secara bersamaan dalam kerangka diskursif yang sama, dengan otoritas agama menciptakan ruang interpretatif melalui ketidaklengkapan strategis sementara agen budaya memanfaatkan ruang ini melalui inovasi diskursif.

**Kata Kunci:** Tradisi *Balimau*, Tradisi Islam Lokal, Negosiasi Kreatif, Pelestarian Budaya, Ortodoksi Agama

## المخلص

تتناول هذه الأطروحة التفاوض الإبداعي في التقاليد الإسلامية المحلية من خلال تحليل إثنوغرافي لتقليد *باليماو* في قرية كونتو، مقاطعة رياو، إندونيسيا. عندما بدأت بحثي حول طقس الاستحمام المميز هذا على ضفاف نهر *سوبايانغ* في عام 2015، انجذبت في البداية لتوثيق ما بدا مثلاً مباشراً للممارسة الإسلامية المحلية. ومع ذلك، كشف العمل الميداني المستمر الذي قمت به من 2021 إلى 2024 أن هذا التقليد، الذي بدأ بالفعل كطقس بسيط، قد خضع لتحولات معقدة. أصبح البحث مقنعاً بشكل خاص بعد إعادة بناء الجدول المحوري في عام 2017 عندما أعلنت السلطات الدينية أن التقليد قد انحرف عن الممارسة الإسلامية الصحيحة.

يستكشف البحث كيف تحرك مجتمع كونتو بين الأرثوذكسية الدينية ومطالبات الحفاظ على الثقافة عندما واجه تقليدهم الذي يروى أنه يمتد لقرون تهديدات وجودية. من خلال الملاحظة بالمشاركة والمقابلات المتعمقة، وثقت المسار التاريخي من ممارسة التطهير البسيطة إلى التقليد الثقافي المتنازع عليه. تكشف الدراسة أن استدامة التقليد لا تعتمد فقط على السلطات الدينية الرسمية ولكن على التفاوض المعقد الذي يشمل جميع أفراد المجتمع الذين لديهم مصالح اجتماعية أو سياسية أو اقتصادية في الممارسات التقليدية. أصبحت أزمة 2017 لحظة فاصلة عندما قام منظمو الشباب بإطلاق نموذج مصغر من نعش في نهر *سوبايانغ* مع لافتات تعلن "التقليد مات"، مما يوضح كيف يعمل التفاوض من خلال التعبير عن الحزن الجماعي على فقدان التقليد، بدلاً من المواجهة اللاهوتية المباشرة.

يقدم تحليلي مفهوم "التفاوض الإبداعي في التقاليد الإسلامية المحلية" لفهم كيف تحافظ المجتمعات على ممارسات ذات معنى دون مواجهة السلطة الدينية بشكل مباشر. أقوم بتوليف ثلاث وجهات نظر نظرية متكاملة: مفهوم ليلى أبو لغد للمقاومة المدمجة التي تعمل داخل هياكل السلطة بدلاً من ضدها، وتحليل جيمس سكوت لكيفية أن تصبح الفضاءات الطقوسية ساحات سياسية حيث يتم الطعن في المعنى، وإطار أصف بيات للتعدي الهادئ من خلال التراكم التدريجي للمكاسب الصغيرة. يكشف هذا التوليف أن التفاوض الإبداعي يعمل في وقت واحد من خلال ثلاث آليات مترابطة: تحديد الموقع المدمج ضمن الأطر الإسلامية القائمة، والتحول السياسي لمعنى الطقوس والسلطة، والتقدم التدريجي للمطالب الثقافية دون مواجهة.

من خلال التحليل الإثنوغرافي أوضح كيف عملت هذه الآليات أثناء وبعد أزمة 2017. لم يتحدّ منظمو الشباب السلطة الدينية بشكل مباشر أو يشككوا في الشرعية الإسلامية. بدلاً من ذلك، عبروا عن الحزن على موت التقليد مع التأكيد على الروابط الاجتماعية والحقوق الدستورية، ووضعوا أنفسهم كناحيين ثقافيين بدلاً من متمردين دينيين. حوّل احتجاجهم نهر *سوبايانغ* إلى ساحة سياسية حيث تم الطعن علناً في المطالبات المتنافسة حول التقاليد والحدثة والأصالة الإسلامية. شكل هذا العمل المرئي جزءاً من نمط أطول من المقاومة الهادئة، حيث واصل الشباب التنظيم والحفاظ على شبكات المجتمع وأعادوا تأطير الخطاب تدريجياً من "هل هذا إسلامي؟" إلى "هل هذا تقليدنا؟"

تثبت النتائج أن التقاليد الإسلامية تحافظ على حيويتها ليس من خلال الأرثوذكسية الصارمة ولكن من خلال التوترات المنتجة بين التفسيرات المتنافسة. تكشف حالة *باليماو* كيف أن مبدأ “عادة *باساندي* شرع، شرع *باساندي* كتاب الله” (العادة تستند إلى الشريعة الإسلامية، والشريعة الإسلامية تستند إلى القرآن) لا يعمل كصيغة ثابتة ولكن كإطار ديناميكي يمكن التكيف الإبداعي. وضع كل من منتقدي ومدافعي *باليماو* أنفسهم على أنهم يدعمون هذا المبدأ، مما يوضح كيف يمكن للمواقف المتنوعة أن تتعايش ضمن إطار إسلامي مشترك بدلاً من الأرثوذكسية الموحدة. تعمل تفسيرات شرعية متعددة في وقت واحد ضمن نفس الإطار الخطابي، حيث تخلق السلطات الدينية مساحة تفسيرية من خلال عدم الاكتمال الاستراتيجي بينما تستغل الجهات الفاعلة الثقافية هذه المساحة من خلال الابتكار الخطابي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تقليد *باليماو*، التقاليد الإسلامية المحلية، التفاوض الإبداعي، الحفاظ على الثقافة، الأرثوذكسية الدينية



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## TRANSLITERATION

This work contains many non-English words in languages such as Indonesian, Kuntu, Minangkabau and Arabic. I write non-English words in italics. Short explanations of non-English words are written inside brackets ( ) and footnotes are used for longer and more detailed explanations. To write Arabic words, the transliteration system of the Library of Congress and the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* have been used with slight variations.

ء= '	د= d	ض= ḍ	ك= k
ب= b	ذ= dh	ط= ṭ	ل= l
ت= t	ر= r	ظ= ḍ	م= m
ث= th	ز= z	ع= '	ن= n
ج= j	س= s	غ= gh	و= w
ح= ḥ	ش= sh	ف= f	ه= h
خ= kh	ص= ṣ	ق= q	ي= y
Short:	= a	= i	= u
Long:	ا = ā	ي = ī	و = ū
Diphthong:	اي = ay		او = aw

The *ta marbuta* (ة) is omitted unless it occurs within an *iḍāfa* in which case it is written “t”, such as *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Arabic words that have been incorporated into Indonesian, Kuntu, Minangkabau and indicate certain events, names of institutions and persons, or are now part of the vocabulary of these languages, are written in their Indonesianized form, such as ‘*Ahli Hikmah*’ instead of ‘*Ahl al- Ḥikmah*’, ‘*Akhwat-Ikhwan*’ instead of ‘*Akhwāt-Ikhwān*’, and ‘*Sultan Hasanuddin*’ instead of ‘*Sulṭān Ḥasan al-Dīn*’.

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## GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

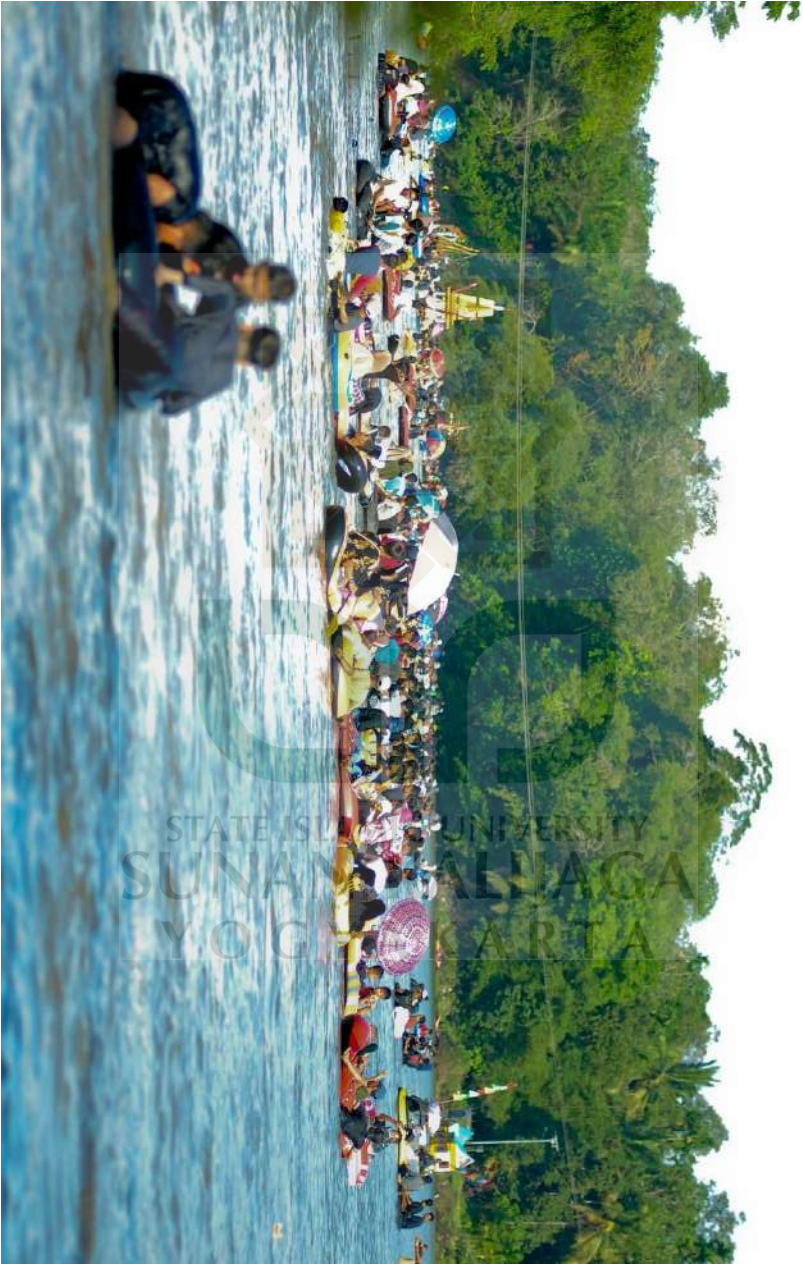
<i>Adat</i>	:	Customary law; traditional practices and norms that govern social life in Indonesian communities
<i>Adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah</i>	:	Custom based on Islamic law, Islamic law based on the Quran”; fundamental philosophy governing the relationship between customary law and Islamic teachings in Kuntu
<i>Bagaghak</i>	:	Traditional musical ensemble or performance in Kuntu
<i>Baliak ka Koto</i>	:	“Return to the village”; preparatory phase before Ramadan when people return to their hometown
<i>Balimau</i>	:	Pre-Ramadan purification ritual involving bathing with citrus fruits ( <i>limau</i> ); the central tradition examined in this dissertation
<i>Ban</i>	:	Makeshift boats made from tire inner tubes used during the <i>Balimau</i> procession
<i>Berhilir (bailiu)</i>	:	The act of going downstream; refers to the river procession during <i>Balimau</i>
<i>Bilo Kojan</i>	:	Traditional title for the muezzin from the Datuk Rajo Tunso clan
<i>Datuk/Datuak</i>	:	Honorary title for traditional leaders or respected elders
<i>Ghin-poghin</i>	:	Cooperative work system in agriculture where farmers work on each other’s fields in rotation
<i>Gondang Oguang</i>	:	Traditional musical instrument/ensemble that became controversial when added to Balimau celebrations in the 1970s
<i>Imam nagoghi</i>	:	Village imam; religious leader from the Datuk Malin Puti clan
<i>Jalan dialiahkan dek ughang lalu</i>	:	The main road changed by passersby”; metaphor for how outsiders influence local customs

<i>Kafan</i>	: Burial shroud; used symbolically in 2017 protests
<i>Khalifah</i>	: Highest traditional leader in Kuntu
<i>Kotik dubalang</i>	: Traditional title for the khatib (sermon giver) from the Datuk Makhudun clan
<i>Lang-gulang</i>	: Tall platform (10-15 meters) built in fields during planting season
<i>Limau</i>	: Citrus fruits used in the Balimau ritual
<i>Limau godang</i>	: Pomelo; large citrus fruit
<i>Limau kambiang</i>	: Type of citrus used for medicinal purposes
<i>Limau kape</i>	: Type of citrus used for cooking (sour)
<i>Limau kobau</i>	: Type of citrus similar to limau kambiang
<i>Limau kociak</i>	: Calamondin; specific citrus variety required for <i>Balimau</i> in Kuntu
<i>Limau pughik</i>	: Type of citrus used for medicinal remedies
<i>Lubuk Larangan</i>	: Restricted fishing areas in the river
<i>Malin</i>	: Local term for Islamic religious teacher/scholar (from Arabic <i>mu'allim</i> )
<i>Malin nagoghi nan ba ompek</i>	: "The four religious leaders"; specific religious officials with ceremonial duties
<i>Mamboniah</i>	: The act of placing rice seeds in planting holes
<i>Mandua kan Poso</i>	: "Hosting for fasting"; tradition of preparing meals for those beginning their fast
<i>Manugo</i>	: Rice planting activity; traditionally accompanied by festivities
<i>Muhrim</i>	: Family members with whom marriage is forbidden; <i>mahram</i> in Arabic
<i>Nagoghi/Nagari</i>	: Village; administrative unit
<i>Ninik Mamak</i>	: Traditional leaders; clan heads who represent customary authority
<i>Persukuan</i>	: Clan system; kinship groups
<i>Piaw</i>	: Traditional canoe used for river transportation
<i>Pitata</i>	: Traditional sayings or proverbs
<i>Qadhi Nagoghi</i>	: Village judge for Islamic marriages

<i>Rantau</i>	: River area; also refers to areas outside one's homeland
<i>Satali dagha</i>	: Blood relatives; those connected by kinship
<i>Shalawatan</i>	: Islamic devotional songs praising Prophet Muhammad
<i>Subayang</i>	: Name of the river where Balimau takes place
<i>Sutan Jalelo</i>	: Title of the Ninik Mamak responsible for river affairs
<i>Talang</i>	: Agricultural fields, particularly for rice cultivation
<i>Tali Bapilin Tigo</i>	: “Rope of three strands”; tripartite governance system comprising traditional leaders, religious authorities, and government officials
<i>Tobo</i>	: Communal work; cooperation
<i>Tombo</i>	: Historical narrative; oral history
<i>Tugo</i>	: Pointed wooden stick used for making planting holes
<i>Ulayat</i>	: Communal land under customary law
<i>Umara/Umaro</i>	: Government officials; one of the three pillars of authority
<i>Wali nagari</i>	: Guardian; village head

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*Figure 2 Balimau tradition in Kuntu (2022)*



# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Research Background

This dissertation intervenes in contemporary debates on how tradition is practiced, contested, and rearticulated in everyday Muslim life. Through an ethnographic analysis of the *Balimau*<sup>1</sup> tradition in Kuntu village, Riau Province, Indonesia, I demonstrate that Islamic traditions maintain their vitality not through rigid orthodoxy but through creative negotiation and transformative engagement within local Islamic frameworks. The research reveals how Muslim communities navigate the productive tensions between religious authorities and the Balimau organizers, both of whom claim to uphold cultural preservation within Kuntu's foundational principle of “*Adat basanding syara', syara' basanding kitabullah*” (custom stands alongside Islamic law, Islamic law stands alongside the Quran), yet each articulating distinctly different versions of what this preservation means in practice. These competing interpretations generate strategies that respect Islamic boundaries while creating new possibilities for meaningful practice.

The *Balimau* case offers a particularly compelling lens for examining these dynamics because it embodies the complex negotiations that characterize lived Islam across Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia. What began as a simple purification ritual has evolved into a contested field where different actors deploy competing claims about authenticity, authority, and identity. This dissertation contributes to anthropological understanding of how local Islamic traditions operate through ongoing argument rather than fixed

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<sup>1</sup> Literally meaning: bathing with *limau* or orange. In the language of the Kuntu people, oranges are generally called *limau*. However, the orange they use in the *Balimau* tradition is calamondin orange, which they call *limau kociak* (small orange), referring to its size, or *limau ughang mati* (orange for death people), referring to the function of this orange which they also use to bathe deceased person. See Dona Kahfi. Ma. Iballa, “Tradisi Mandi Balimau Di Masyarakat Kuntu: Living Hadis Sebagai Bukti Sejarah,” *Jurnal Living Hadis* 1, no. 2 (2016).

consensus, and how communities creatively negotiate authoritative discourses while remaining within their Islamic frameworks.

When I first began researching this distinctive bathing ritual along the banks of the Subayang River in 2015 during my master's studies, I was initially drawn to document what appeared to be a straightforward example of local Islamic practice. I observed community members gathering annually to perform pre-Ramadan purification rituals that seemed to reflect the kind of creative synthesis between Islamic teachings and local customs that characterizes Indonesian religious traditions. Such purification practices before Ramadan are widespread across the Indonesian archipelago, each bearing distinctive regional characteristics. In Java, communities practice *Padusan*, gathering at sacred springs or rivers to cleanse themselves before the holy month, a ritual tracing its origins to both pre-Islamic Hindu-Buddhist traditions and later Islamic adaptations by the *Wali Songo*.<sup>2</sup> North Sumatran communities practice *Marpangir*,<sup>3</sup> bathing with aromatic herbs and spices like pandan leaves and lemongrass, while in Lampung the tradition appears as *Belangiran*.<sup>4</sup> These diverse regional practices share common underlying purposes of physical and spiritual purification, yet each maintains distinctive local elements that reflect particular historical trajectories.

When I returned six years later to conduct extensive fieldwork from 2021 to 2024 for this dissertation research, however, I discovered layers of complexity I had not anticipated during those earlier observations. I reconstructed through witness accounts and community testimonies the pivotal 2017 controversy that had fundamentally altered the tradition's trajectory. Through careful interviews with participants, observers, and community leaders, I

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<sup>2</sup> Dwiana Retno Yulianti, Sriwahyu Istana Trahutami, and Reny Wiyatasari, "The Meaning of Water in Javanese Padusan and Japanese Misogi-Harai Rituals," *E3S Web of Conferences* 317 (2021): 1–9.

<sup>3</sup> Nurhafifah Siregar, Yusra Dewi Siregar, and Jufri Naldo, "Dinamika Tradisi Marpangir Di Kabupaten Padang Lawas Utara, 1990-2000," *Local History & Heritage* 3, no. 2 (2023): 79–88, <https://doi.org/10.57251/lhh.v3i2.1104>.

<sup>4</sup> "Twenties: 20 Indonesian Rituals for Ramadan and Idul Fitri," *The Jakarta Post*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/paper/2022/04/25/twenties-20-indonesian-rituals-for-ramadan-and-idul-fitri.html>.



pieced together what initially appeared to be a simple conflict familiar to many contexts: young people organizing an event that religious leaders considered inappropriate, authorities withholding support, and community members caught between tradition and religious orthodoxy. Yet as my ethnographic investigation deepened through sustained fieldwork, I discovered that this apparent confrontation masked far more creative dynamics of negotiation than initial reconstructions suggested.

The *Balimau* tradition in Kuntu represents more than a seasonal ritual marking the transition into Ramadan. As I came to understand through sustained ethnographic engagement, it constitutes an arena where fundamental questions about religious authority, cultural authenticity, and community identity are continuously negotiated through what I term “creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition.” This concept, which emerged from careful analysis of how different actors navigated the 2017 crisis around the *Balimau*, reveals how Islamic traditions maintain vitality not through rigid orthodoxy but through productive tensions between competing interpretations and innovative strategies that preserve essential meanings while transforming specific forms.

Kuntu itself provides a particularly compelling setting for examining these dynamics. As one of the oldest villages in Riau Province, Kuntu is administratively part of Kampar Kiri District, Kampar Regency, located approximately 85 kilometers south of Pekanbaru, the provincial capital.<sup>5</sup> The village sits strategically along the Subayang River, a tributary of the province’s largest river, the Kampar River, which flows from Pasaman and Lima Puluh Kota districts in West Sumatra and empties into Kuala Kampar and Pelalawan to the Strait of Malacca, one of the main entrances of

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<sup>5</sup> Ellya Roza, *Sejarah Islam Riau* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Aswaja Pressindo, 2017), 93; Ellya Roza and Yasnel, “Islamisasi Di Riau (Kajian Sejarah Dan Budaya Tentang Masuk Dan Berkembangnya Islam Di Kuntu Kampar),” *Sosial Budaya: Media Komunikasi Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial Dan Budaya* 12, no. 01 (2015): 113–16.

Muslim traders to Sumatra island in the past.<sup>6</sup> This geographical positioning proved crucial for understanding how Islam entered and took root in this area, as the river served as both a commercial highway and a conduit for religious transmission.

According to general theories of Islamization in Indonesia, Islam came through trade, marriage, and Islamic esoteric preaching.<sup>7</sup> In view of the geographical position of the Subayang River, we can at least imagine how Islam entered this area where local people were in contact with foreign traders in the past. Moreover, Kuntu in the past is considered as one of the world's most essential pepper producers from 500-1400 AD and served as a storehouse of raw materials for spices and forest products. Therefore, it makes sense many believe that the first Islamic Kingdom in Riau, the Kingdom or Sultanate of Kuntu Darussalam, was established in this area.<sup>8</sup> This historical precedence lends particular weight to contemporary debates about religious authenticity and traditional practice, as community members regularly invoke their ancestors' pioneering role in regional Islamization to legitimize their positions in current controversies.

Ricklefs, in *A History of Modern Indonesia Since C. 1200*, emphasizes that the process of Islamization or the advent of Islam remains the most obscure processes in Indonesian history, yet it plays a significant role, mainly because the formation of new Muslim communities led to the construction of Indonesian traditions and culture.<sup>9</sup> However, scholars concur that "encounter" influences the production of new cultures and traditions. In various ways, the meeting of Islam and local cultures of Indonesia, with cultural acculturation, assimilation, and other means, has arisen distinctive

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<sup>6</sup> Zulfa Amira, "Menjaga Sungai Subayang Demi Kehidupan Dan Keseimbangan Alam," ekuatorial, 2022, <https://www.ekuatorial.com/2022/03/menjaga-sungai-subayang/>.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Abdul Karim, "Islam in Indonesia: A Historical Persepective," *Indonesian Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies (IJIIS)*, 2018, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Iballa, "Tradisi Mandi Balimau Di Masyarakat Kuntu: Living Hadis Sebagai Bukti Sejarah," 289–291; Read also Roza, *Sejarah Islam Riau*, 102–115.

<sup>9</sup> Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since C. 1200* (London: Palgrave, 2001), 3.

new traditions.<sup>10</sup> Yet the very success of early Islamization in Kuntu created the conditions for the complex negotiations I observed during my fieldwork. The encounter between Islamic teachings and existing local practices produced what scholars of Indonesian Islam recognize as distinctive traditions that reflect creative synthesis rather than simple replacement of pre-Islamic customs.

In the context of traditions in the Kuntu community, several customs, such as the *Turun Mandi* tradition, the *Lubuk Larangan* tradition, and the *Balimau* tradition, still occur by the river. It is understandable because the river, which is 100-143 meters wide, was the surrounding community's life source. Regarding customs and beliefs, the river is an essential part of the culture in the Kuntu community. In the past, it served as a work site, transportation route, source of drinking water, and place to bathe and wash clothes. The *Balimau* tradition exemplifies this synthetic process, incorporating elements that connect simultaneously to Islamic purification concepts, local agricultural cycles, and community social organization centered around the river's seasonal rhythms.

When I began this research in 2016, I initially approached *Balimau* as an example of what scholars<sup>11</sup> term "living hadith", traditions that communities understand as implementing prophetic example despite questionable textual foundations. In my preliminary article, I argued that the tradition could serve as evidence of the history of Islamization

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<sup>10</sup> This explains why local Indonesian traditions have not entirely extinct in the process of Islamization. See: Nelly Marhayati and Suryanto, "The Acculturation Strategy of the Tabut Community in Bengkulu," *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 24, no. 3 (2017): 407.

<sup>11</sup> The concept of "Living Hadith" was first introduced by the historian Barbara Metcalf in her 1993 article, "Living Hadith in Tablighi Jamaah." It was later explored by scholars in Yogyakarta through key events, notably the 2005 national seminar "The Living Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Everyday Life", followed by a 2006 workshop on the "Methodology of the Living Qur'ān and Hadith" at the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga. See Saifuddin Zuhri Qudsy et al., "The Making of Living Ḥadīth: A New Direction of Ḥadīth Studies in Indonesia," *Culture and Religion* 23, no. 4 (2023): 353–372; Saifuddin Zuhri Qudsy and Subkhani Kusuma Dewi, *Living Hadis: Praktik, Resepsi, Teks, Dan Transmisi* (Yogyakarta: Q-Media & Ilmu Hadis Press, 2018); See also: Barbara D. Metcalf, "Living Ḥadīth in the Tablighī Jama'āt," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 3 (1993): 584–608.

in the area, representing a form of acculturation between local culture and Islamic teachings. On the one hand, the *Balimau* bathing resembles the ritual bathing of Hindus in India.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, I found that the initial basis of people who maintain the tradition is what they believe as hadith originating from the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>13</sup>

However, as my research progressed, I discovered that the contemporary *Balimau* practice had evolved far beyond this historical framework of Islamic-local acculturation. Local elders still explained to me that “*Balimau*” in their language means mixing water with *limau* (calamondin oranges) as a whole-body cleanser, much like how we use soap and shampoo today, reflecting the tradition’s literal meaning and original purification purpose. Yet what I observed during the actual events presented a striking contrast: hundreds of people floating down approximately 5 km of the Subayang River using inner car tubes and rubber boats, accompanied by decorated canoes representing each hamlet and various competitions and entertainment activities that resembled a vibrant youth festival more than the solemn religious observance I had initially expected to encounter.

This transformation brought to mind Durkheim’s insights about the dynamic nature of traditions and their essential role in maintaining social solidarity. For Durkheim, traditions serve as key components of social cohesion, but they must evolve through innovations to ensure not just the maintenance of social solidarity but the very survival of societies themselves. As he argued, the sources of these fundamental sociocultural innovations lie in social ideals, which “are not abstractions, cold intellectual concepts lacking efficient power. They are essentially dynamic, for behind them are the powerful forces of the

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<sup>12</sup> Suroyo et al., “The Influence of Hindu Tradition on Petang Megang Ritual and Its Significance to the Indigenous Muslim Community in Pekanbaru Riau,” *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 11, no. 1 June (2022): 70–73.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, I did not find any of the hadith they were referring to in any of the nine books of Hadith, except in the Book of Durrutan Nasihin, which in the past was often referred to by local preachers. Moreover, the hadith does not include its source and chain of transmission (*sanad*), which in Hadith science is known as a “*dhaif*” or even a “*false*” (*maudhû*). See Iballa, “Tradisi Mandi Balimau Di Masyarakat Kuntu: Living Hadis Sebagai Bukti Sejarah”, 285.

collective.”<sup>14</sup> What I was witnessing in Kuntu seemed to embody precisely this kind of collective force at work, transforming an ancient purification practice into something that could address contemporary social needs while maintaining its essential communal character.

The crisis that fundamentally altered my understanding began in 2017, when local authorities deliberated and decided that the current *Balimau* event contradicted the original Kuntu tradition, especially regarding the mixing of men and women when floating and bathing in the Subayang River. This decision emerged from the traditional authority structure known as *Tali Bapilin Tigo*, which refers to three formal and informal leaders integrated in partnerships for making policies toward shared wholeness.<sup>15</sup> These three pillars consist of traditional leaders (*Ninik Mamak*) who control the community with guidance, advice, and customary law; the *Umara*, which currently refers to the regional government as organizer of government affairs;<sup>16</sup> and the clerical (*Malin* or *Ulama*) group, religious leaders whose job is to protect, foster, and guide Islamic teachings, especially in spiritual matters.<sup>17</sup>

This legal system serves as the foundation for the principle of “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*” (custom is based on sharia, and sharia is grounded on the holy Quran), a central concept to life in Kuntu, as it is throughout Kampar generally.<sup>18</sup> The principle

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<sup>14</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy*, ed. D. F. Pocock (trans) (London: Cohen & West, 1965), 93.

<sup>15</sup> Ali Akbar Datuk Pangeran, *Kemitraan Adat Tali Berpilin Tiga Daerah Kampar-Riau* (Bangkinang: LKATIKA, 1996), 1.

<sup>16</sup> In its history, what they call the umara has changed its name and rules several times from time to time, since the royal era until now. See, Sumarsono, Lindyastuti S, and Y. Sigit Widyanto, *Sistem Pemerintahan Tradisional Di Riau* (Jakarta: Proyek Pengkajian dan Pembinaan Nilai-Nilai Budaya Direktorat Sejarah dan Nilai Tradisional Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1997), 24–39.

<sup>17</sup> Nur Hidayat and Desi Apriani, “Judicial Review According to Kampar Customary Law: Contribution in Making a Responsive Law,” *Jurnal Konstitusi* 19, no. 1 (2022): 225–46.

<sup>18</sup> The Kuntu customary principle has something in common with the Minangkabau’s, who also believes that their customs and Islamic teachings are one unit. The belief is as stated by Sualiman al-Rasuli at the Ulama, Ninik Mamak, and Cerdik Pandai Congress in Bukit Tinggi in 1952: “*Syarak mangato adat mamakai, Minangkabau bertubuh adat berjiwa syarak, penghulu-penghulu selaku juru batu*

conceptually establishes that community customs exist in harmony with Islamic teachings, creating an understanding that tradition and Islamic law have blended as one entity. Therefore, all community customs and traditions, including the *Balimau* tradition, must comply with this principle, with the three authorities of the *Tali Bapilin Tigo* serving as determiners of whether practices remain appropriate or contradict established principles.<sup>19</sup>

Yet this selective criticism, which targeting transformations rather than the tradition's core, created interpretive space that community members exploited through remarkably strategies of negotiation. When village governments withdrew their support for local youths organizing the 2017 *Balimau* event, the Subayang River was notably quiet, with only a few groups of youths floating downstream carrying banners with the words "tradition is dead" as an act of protest, some wrapping banana stems with shrouds as symbols of customary death. However, rather than defending *Balimau*'s Islamic legitimacy through theological argument, youth organizers and community supporters developed what I came to recognize as discursive reframing strategies that shifted debate from religious correctness to cultural preservation, from theological interpretation to constitutional rights, from Islamic authenticity to local identity.

The historical precedent for such strategies of negotiation became clear through conversations with village elders, who recounted earlier innovations and conflicts surrounding the tradition. They explained that the *Balimau* tradition was initially a simple ceremony, but village youths had innovated by adding boats carrying the *Gondang Oguang*, a traditional musical instrument popular among them, which accompanied boats used by authorities and made the ceremony more vibrant. This innovation had faced criticism from a charismatic

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*dan alim ulama selaku kemudi, adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah* (Sharia instructs so tradition acts, Minangkabau bodied tradition and has the spirit of sharia, the traditional leaders as navigators and religious scholars as the helmsman, tradition is based on sharia, sharia is based on the Quran)." See, Deliar Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam Di Indonesia 1900-1942* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1991), 293.

<sup>19</sup> M Taufik Mandailing, *Islam Kampar: Harmoni Islam Dan Tradisi Lokal* (Yogyakarta: Idea Press, 2020), 9.



religious leader in the 1970s, who argued that the music made the *Balimau* tradition negligent and contradicted Islamic teachings. Despite negotiations where the religious leader agreed to participate if traditional music was replaced with *salawatan* (religious songs), youth continued using *Gondang Oguang*, leading the religious leader to dramatically jump from his boat and boycott future events. Yet the tradition continued with various innovations until the 2017 crisis occurred.

The theoretical significance of these findings extends far beyond the immediate context of a single village's ritual practices. Through ethnographic analysis of how different actors navigated the 2017 crisis, I developed insights that advance our understanding of dynamics of local Islamic traditions. The case reveals how arguments and conflicts over the form and significance of practices constitute natural and productive features of local Islamic tradition rather than signs of weakness or deviation.

Most importantly, my research challenges conventional understandings of religious authority as flowing unidirectionally from text to practice, from scholars to community, from orthodoxy to heterodoxy. Instead, the *Balimau* case demonstrates how Islamic traditions maintain coherence through productive argument and creative negotiations that respect established boundaries while generating new possibilities within them. This process operates through what I call "creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition" – a form of innovative engagement that preserves essential meanings while adapting specific forms to changing circumstances.

Talal Asad's concept of discursive tradition has shaped much contemporary scholarship on Islamic practice. His insight that Islamic tradition consists of "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice" offers a powerful framework for understanding how Muslims debate orthodoxy through reference to foundational texts.<sup>20</sup> However, my ethnographic encounter with *Balimau* reveals practices that operate

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<sup>20</sup> Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown Univ, 1986), 14.



through different logics. While participants engage in arguments about proper Islamic practice, these arguments do not center on competing interpretations of scriptural sources. Instead, I found community members creatively negotiating their tradition through strategic reframing, selective emphasis, and culturally grounded reasoning that remains respectful of Islamic frameworks without necessarily engaging in the textual debates that Asad's model prioritizes. This ethnographic reality pushed me toward conceptualizing what I call "creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition," where arguments operate through cultural rather than primarily textual registers.

In Kuntu, both critics and defenders of contemporary *Balimau* positioned themselves as upholding the foundational principle *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*. The *ulama* or *malin* group does not want to appear anti-traditional, while organizers do not want to appear as opposing religious teachings. Understanding these dynamics required developing methodological approaches capable of capturing what people strategically chose not to say as well as what they explicitly articulated. My discovery of "educated silence," "calculated neutrality," and "pragmatic support" (in chapter IV) emerged only through sustained fieldwork that attended to meaningful absences in public discourse. As community members gradually shared their private perspectives with me, I recognized forms of negotiation that operated through strategic ambiguity rather than direct confrontation.

The youth organizers who maintained *Balimau* despite official disapproval employed particularly strategies of discursive reframing. By shifting emphasis from *Balimau*'s religious significance to its cultural importance, they accessed alternative frameworks for legitimation and protection. This reframing proved remarkably effective because it bypassed religious authority altogether while maintaining the practice's essential social functions.

"This is about our identity as Kuntu people," became a standard refrain that shifted debate from theological correctness to cultural authenticity. When I observed youth preparations for the 2022 *Balimau* event after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, one of the

organizers explained their efforts as reviving tradition, quoting a Kuntu proverb (*pitata*) “*Gami tobian dek ghang mudo, elok nagoghi dek ghang tuo*” (the village becomes alive because of the youth and becomes good because of the elders). They positioned themselves as young citizens exercising democratic rights rather than Muslims challenging religious authority, securing only verbal permission without financial assistance while collecting street donations to fund the event.

These strategies succeeded because they demonstrated an understanding of how different legitimating frameworks operate in contemporary Indonesia. Rather than challenging religious authorities directly, organizers created alternative discursive spaces where *Balimau* could flourish under different forms of protection. This approach enabled them to preserve what they claim as the tradition while adapting to new constraints imposed by religious critics.

The effectiveness of these strategies of negotiation also depended on broader community support that operated largely through complex moral arguments that engaged with Islamic principles through everyday language and practical reasoning rather than formal theological discourse. The most powerful of these arguments centered around critiques that challenged the moral authority of critics by questioning their own spiritual authenticity. This critique revealed an engagement with Islamic concepts of spiritual humility and moral accountability. Community members argued that criticizing others’ religious practices while neglecting one’s own spiritual development violated fundamental Islamic principles about judgment and self-reflection. This argument proved particularly effective because it turned religious discourse back on the critics themselves, questioning their authority to pronounce on others’ spiritual practices.

However, the geographic and historical context of Kuntu proved crucial for understanding how these dynamics played out in practice. The village’s location along the Subayang River connected it to broader regional networks of trade, communication, and religious transmission that shaped local interpretations of Islamic practice. The river itself functioned as both practical resource and symbolic

reference point that linked contemporary debates to historical processes of Islamization and cultural synthesis. Many traditional leaders emphasized the river's role in early Islamic development in the region during our conversations. Community elders told me that their ancestors learned Islamic practices along these same riverbanks, often incorporating water-based rituals that reflected both religious requirements and local environmental conditions. This historical awareness provided contemporary actors with cultural resources for legitimizing practices that might appear questionable from purely textual perspectives.

Moreover, the principle of *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* functioned as a dynamic framework that enabled creative interpretation rather than rigid constraint. Community members invoked this principle to argue that authentic Islamic practice required respectful integration with local customs rather than wholesale replacement of traditional forms. This interpretation created space for defending *Balimau* as simultaneously Islamic and authentically local.

Religious authorities acknowledged the validity of this interpretive framework while maintaining that contemporary *Balimau* transformations violated its essential requirements. They argued that true integration of custom and Islamic law required careful attention to textual boundaries that recent innovations had transgressed. This position enabled them to appear supportive of traditional culture while maintaining their role as guardians of religious authenticity. The sophistication of these arguments reveals how their local Islamic traditions operate through respectful engagement with competing perspectives rather than authoritarian imposition of single interpretations. Both sides recognized the legitimacy of concerns raised by their counterparts while maintaining their own positions. This dynamic created productive space for negotiation that preserved essential elements of the tradition while accommodating changing circumstances.

These findings have implications that extend beyond the immediate context of Kuntu to broader questions about religious authority, cultural change, and creative agency in Muslim societies

globally. The case demonstrates that arguments and conflicts over the form and significance of practices constitute natural and productive features of local Islamic tradition that enable rather than threaten traditional continuity.

As I write this analysis, *Balimau* has returned to Kuntu's river. The tradition I observe today carries clear traces of transformation while remaining fundamentally recognizable to those who have practiced it for generations. Despite ongoing contests over its proper form, the ritual continues to draw participants year after year. The tradition bears the marks of its passage through crisis, yet it persists as a meaningful practice that connects community members to their identity, their history, and their faith. This capacity to endure through periods of change reveals the creative negotiation that characterizes local Islamic traditions and the communities that sustain them.

## **B. Research Question and Purpose**

This dissertation proposes to observe creative resistance to the *Balimau* tradition's transformation, its innovations, and its relationship to Islamic discursive tradition in the Kuntu community. This research departs from a hypothesis that tradition sustainability is determined not only by formal religious authorities but also depends on complex negotiations involving all parties who have social, political, or economic interests in the tradition's existence. Therefore, creative negotiation emerges when formal authority conflicts with these broader community interests, generating innovative strategies that preserve essential meanings while adapting specific forms.

My research reveals that the negotiation in Kuntu operates through what I term "creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition," strategies that respect established local Islamic frameworks while creating new possibilities for practice. This process involves discursive reframing, and vernacular intellectualism that challenges authority through moral argumentation rather than direct confrontation.

The objective of the present work is to answer the following research questions:

1. How did the Kuntu community negotiate the 2017 crisis?

2. What strategies did different actors employ to maintain their positions?
3. How do local Islamic traditions, within the *adat basandi syarak*, *syarak basandi Kitabullah* framework, maintain vitality through negotiation rather than conformity?

### C. Literature Review

The academic journey that brought me to Kuntu village and its *Balimau* tradition emerged from a growing recognition within anthropological scholarship that Islamic traditions are neither monolithic entities nor static cultural artifacts, but rather dynamic discursive formations that maintain coherence through negotiations. This literature review traces three interconnected scholarly conversations that inform my analysis of creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition: studies of *Balimau* and similar Malay Islamic traditions, theoretical developments in understanding Islam as discursive tradition, and scholarship on resistance within structures of religious and cultural authority.

#### 1. The Scholarly Landscape of *Balimau* Studies

When I first encountered the *Balimau* tradition during preliminary fieldwork in 2015, I discovered a modest but significant body of scholarship documenting similar practices across the Malay world. These studies, while geographically dispersed and methodologically varied, collectively demonstrate that *Balimau* represents a widespread cultural phenomenon that has attracted sustained academic attention precisely because it embodies the complex negotiations between Islamic identity and local cultural practice that characterize Muslim societies throughout Southeast Asia.

The existing literature on *Balimau* reveals both remarkable consistency in ritual purpose and significant variation in local implementation. Studies across Sumatra consistently identify *Balimau* as a purification ritual performed in anticipation of Ramadan, yet each location exhibits distinctive characteristics that reflect local histories, authority structures, and cultural

negotiations. In Kuapan Village, Tambang District, Kampar Regency, Arman documents the practice of eating *majamma* or *bajambau* (communal meal) before bathing in the Kampar River, emphasizing the communal meal as an integral component of the purification process.<sup>21</sup> This integration of consumption and cleansing rituals suggests that *Balimau* functions as a comprehensive preparation for the sacred month rather than a simple bathing ceremony.

Candra's ethnographic study of *Balimau* in Kenagarian Kambang Utara, Lengayang District, South Pesisir Regency, reveals the elaborate community preparations that typically accompany the ritual.<sup>22</sup> The inclusion of games for children and youth, traditional welcoming dances, and community feasting demonstrates how *Balimau* serves as a focal point for broader social mobilization and cultural performance. These findings align with my own observations in Kuntu, where the tradition has consistently involved not only individual purification but also community celebration and cultural affirmation.

Perhaps most significantly for my research, several studies identify the contested nature of *Balimau* within contemporary Islamic discourse. Moekahar's analysis of symbolic meaning in the *Balimau Kasai* ceremony in Kampar Regency acknowledges ongoing debates about the tradition's Islamic legitimacy while emphasizing its continued importance for cultural identity.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Lismayanti and Asril's study of the musical traditions associated with *Potang Balimau* in Pangkalan Koto Baru

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<sup>21</sup> Fajri Arman, "Persepsi Masyarakat Terhadap Tradisi Balimau Kasai Di Desa Kuapan Kecamatan Tambang Kabupaten Kampar," *Jom FISIP* 2, no. 2 (2015): 1–15.

<sup>22</sup> Jeki Candra, "Peranan Ninik Mamak Dalam Upacara Balimau Di Kenagarian Kambang Utara Kecamatan Lengayang Kabupaten Pesisir Selatan: Tinjauan Historis-Sosiologis" (State Islamic University Imam Bonjol Padang, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Fatmawati Moekahar, "Makna Simbol Dalam Upacara Adat Balimau Kasai Di Kabupaten Kampar," in *Komunikasi Kontemporer: Dinamika Budaya, Jurnalisme & Kehumasan*, ed. Edi Santoso (Purwokerto: FISIP Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, 2018).



demonstrates how artistic innovation within traditional practice becomes a site of cultural negotiation and potential controversy.<sup>24</sup>

These studies establish *Balimau* as a significant cultural phenomenon worthy of serious academic attention, yet they reveal a critical gap in theoretical development regarding how such traditions maintain vitality within Islamic societies characterized by competing claims about authentic practice. Most existing research approaches *Balimau* either as a form of Islamic syncretism that combines pre-Islamic and Islamic elements, or as a local cultural practice that has acquired Islamic legitimation over time. Neither approach adequately captures the dynamic processes through which contemporary Muslim communities navigate the productive tensions between textual authority and lived practice that I observed during my fieldwork in Kuntu.

Most importantly for positioning this current research, my own previous work on the *Balimau* tradition established the ethnographic foundation and initial theoretical direction that this dissertation develops further. In “*Tradisi Mandi Balimau di Masyarakat Kuntu: Living Hadis Sebagai Bukti Sejarah*,” I approached the tradition through the lens of living hadith, arguing that *Balimau* could serve as historical evidence and examining how communities integrate Islamic values with local cultural practices. That study focused primarily on documenting the tradition’s religious significance and its role as living tradition within Islamic framework, emphasizing how *Balimau* represents a form of lived Islam that connects contemporary practice with local Islamic historical precedent.<sup>25</sup>

However, that initial research, while establishing the ethnographic groundwork, did not address the complex dynamics of authority and creative negotiation that became central to my

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<sup>24</sup> Rini Lismayanti and Asril, “Fungsi Musik Pada Tradisi Potang Balimau Di Pangkalan Koto Baru Kabupaten Limapuluh Kota,” *Melayu Art and Performance Journal* 1, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>25</sup> Iballa, “Tradisi Mandi Balimau Di Masyarakat Kuntu: Living Hadis Sebagai Bukti Sejarah.”



later fieldwork experience. The 2017 crisis, which occurred after that publication, revealed dimensions of the tradition that required more advanced theoretical frameworks to understand. While the living hadith approach provided valuable insights into how communities understand their practices within Islamic tradition framework, it did not capture the creative negotiations that emerged when the tradition faced direct challenge from religious authorities.

This current research builds upon that foundational work while extending the analysis in several crucial directions. Where the earlier study focused on documenting and legitimating the tradition within Islamic scholarship, this dissertation examines how communities actively negotiate and transform local Islamic discourse in what organizers frame as efforts to maintain cultural practices. The shift from living hadith framework to creative resistance within discursive tradition reflects both methodological development and the emergence of new empirical realities that demanded more nuanced theoretical tools.

My research builds upon this foundation while addressing its theoretical limitations through engagement with more advanced frameworks for understanding local Islamic tradition. The *Balimau* literature provides essential ethnographic context and comparative perspective, but it requires theoretical development to fully illuminate the creative strategies through which communities maintain meaningful practices within evolving religious discourse.

## **2. Islam, Tradition, and the Question of Authority**

Talal Asad's reconceptualization of Islam has fundamentally shaped contemporary anthropological approaches to Muslim societies. His intervention arose from dissatisfaction with approaches that either reduced Islam to local cultural expressions or essentialized it as a uniform religious system transcending particular contexts.<sup>26</sup> Asad proposed instead that Islam should be

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<sup>26</sup> Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*.

understood as a discursive tradition, a concept that offers more nuanced understanding of how Islamic communities maintain coherence across time and space while accommodating significant diversity in practice and interpretation. His framework has proven particularly influential for analyzing how power operates within religious discourse and how authority becomes established through specific argumentative processes.

Asad's approach differs fundamentally from the symbolic anthropology that dominated earlier Islamic studies. Rather than examining how symbols generate meaning within cultural systems, as Clifford Geertz's interpretive approach suggests, Asad focuses on how power operates to create authoritative discourses that shape what can be said, who can speak, and which practices are deemed legitimate.<sup>27</sup> This post-structural orientation reveals that Islamic practice involves fields of power relations where authority is constantly negotiated, contested, and reformulated. The shift from asking "what does this practice mean?" to asking "how does power authorize certain interpretations and delegitimize others?" has opened new analytical possibilities for understanding religious authority and change in Muslim societies.

According to Asad, an Islamic discursive tradition consists of "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history."<sup>28</sup> This formulation emphasizes several crucial insights. First, Islamic tradition is fundamentally argumentative rather than doctrinal, maintaining coherence through ongoing debates about proper practice rather than through adherence to fixed rules. Second, tradition necessarily involves temporal relationship, connecting practitioners to both Islamic history and future possibilities through their engagement with contemporary practice. Third, the authority of any particular

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<sup>27</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27–54.

<sup>28</sup> Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14.

practice derives not from its conformity to abstract Islamic principles but from its embeddedness within established discursive frameworks that link it to authoritative texts and precedents. Crucially, Asad notes that “argument and conflict over the form and significance of practices are therefore a natural part of any Islamic tradition.”<sup>29</sup> This recognition that debate constitutes a natural rather than exceptional feature of Islamic tradition has proven transformative for anthropological analysis.

Contemporary Islamic studies scholarship has demonstrated the productive applications of Asad’s framework across diverse contexts. Ovamir Anjum’s comprehensive analysis emphasizes that Islam as discursive tradition must be understood as a “historically evolving set of discourses, embodied in the practices and institutions of Islamic societies and hence deeply imbricated in the material life of those inhabiting them.”<sup>30</sup> This understanding of Islamic tradition as both intellectually grounded and materially embedded has proven valuable for analyzing how communities navigate between textual authorities and lived realities. Scholars have shown how both critics and defenders of traditional practices position themselves as authentic interpreters of Islamic tradition, demonstrating the dynamic and argumentative character of Islamic discourse.

Ade Fakih Kurniawan’s ethnographic study of the *Wawacan Seh ritual* in Banten provides a particularly relevant application of Asad’s framework to Indonesian contexts.<sup>31</sup> Like many traditional practices in Muslim-majority societies, *Wawacan Seh* involves community rituals that have attracted criticism from religious authorities concerned about their Islamic authenticity. Kurniawan’s analysis demonstrates how community members

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<sup>29</sup> Asad, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Ovamir Anjum, “Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007): 662, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-2007-041>.

<sup>31</sup> Ade Fakih Kurniawan, “Cultural Negotiation, Authority, and Discursive Tradition: The *Wawacan Seh* Ritual in Banten” (State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga, 2019).

employ complex strategies of “cultural negotiation” that respect established Islamic discourse while creating space for local cultural practice. His work reveals how Asad’s emphasis on power and discourse illuminates the sophisticated ways that Indonesian Muslims navigate between competing claims about proper Islamic practice. The Banten case shows how communities maintain traditions not through direct opposition to religious authority but through careful positioning within Islamic frameworks.

However, Asad’s model of discursive tradition has also generated important critiques and revealed certain limitations when applied to diverse Islamic practices. The framework’s emphasis on arguments that reference foundational texts and engage in scriptural hermeneutics proves particularly illuminating for contexts where religious authority operates primarily through textual interpretation. Scholars studying Islamic legal debates, theological controversies, or reform movements have found Asad’s framework highly productive for analyzing how different actors deploy competing interpretations of Qur’an and hadith to authorize their positions. The model works well for understanding practices where legitimacy derives from demonstrated engagement with canonical sources and established interpretive traditions.

Yet ethnographic research has also revealed Islamic practices that maintain deep connections to Islamic principles and values without necessarily centering on the kinds of textual debates that Asad’s model emphasizes. In many local contexts, communities engage Islamic frameworks through culturally embedded reasoning that invokes general Islamic values without necessarily anchoring arguments in specific scriptural sources. Religious scholars may criticize certain practices, and communities may respond to these criticisms, but the resulting negotiations do not always take the form of competing hadith interpretations or divergent Qur’anic exegeses. Instead, arguments often operate through references to customary principles, appeals to social

harmony, invocations of community well-being, and assertions about cultural authenticity, all framed within broader commitments to Islamic identity and values.

This recognition raises important questions about how we understand Islamic traditions that operate through different registers than those Asad's model anticipates. Are practices that employ Islamic reasoning without centering textual interpretation somehow less Islamic or less legitimate as traditions? How do we analyze arguments about proper practice when these arguments reference Islamic principles without necessarily engaging in scriptural hermeneutics? What analytical frameworks can capture the negotiations through which local communities maintain practices they understand as Islamic while navigating criticism from religious authorities? These questions become particularly pressing in contexts where multiple sources of authority intersect, where customary law and Islamic law both claim legitimacy, and where communities must navigate between religious, cultural, and administrative frameworks.

The Indonesian context presents particularly complex terrain for understanding Islamic tradition. Indonesia's constitutional recognition of both Islamic law and customary law creates unique conditions where communities can draw upon multiple frameworks for authorizing practices. The principle *adat basandi syara', syara' basandi Kitabullah* (custom is based on Islamic law, Islamic law is based on the Quran) establishes hierarchical relationships between different sources of authority while simultaneously creating interpretive flexibility. Communities invoke this principle to demonstrate that their customs ultimately derive from Islamic foundations, while religious authorities invoke it to emphasize Islamic law's primacy. The principle's power lies precisely in its capacity to authorize multiple positions while maintaining all parties' commitment to Islamic frameworks. Understanding how such principles operate requires attention to dynamics that may exceed what discursive tradition models can fully capture.

These considerations suggest the need for analytical frameworks that can accommodate the full diversity of how Muslim communities actually engage with Islamic traditions. Such frameworks would maintain Asad's crucial insights about power, authority, and argumentation while recognizing that Islamic practices can operate through multiple registers beyond primarily textual ones. The challenge lies in developing approaches that neither reduce Islam to local cultural expressions (the problem Asad rightly identified) nor limit Islamic tradition only to practices that engage in explicit scriptural hermeneutics. What might frameworks look like that capture how communities maintain Islamic commitments while employing culturally embedded forms of reasoning? How can we analyze negotiations that respect religious authority while generating space for local practice? These questions require engagement with scholarship beyond Islamic studies alone, particularly work on how communities maintain agency within structures of constraint.

### **3. Resistance, Agency, and the Dynamics of Negotiation**

The anthropological study of how communities navigate relationships with dominant authorities has generated rich scholarship on resistance, agency, and power. This body of literature provides essential analytical tools for understanding how relatively powerless groups maintain agency within structures of constraint. While this scholarship initially focused on resistance as opposition to domination, contemporary work increasingly recognizes more complex dynamics of negotiation, accommodation, and creative engagement. Understanding these theoretical developments proves crucial for analyzing how Muslim communities maintain cultural practices while navigating religious authority.

James Scott's foundational work on "everyday forms of resistance" established key frameworks that continue to shape contemporary analysis. Scott's study of Malaysian peasants revealed how subordinate groups employ subtle strategies like



“foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage” to assert their interests without directly confronting authority.<sup>32</sup> His concept of “hidden transcripts” as the “critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” illuminated how subordinate groups develop alternative narratives while maintaining public compliance.<sup>33</sup> Scott’s insights proved transformative by revealing that resistance need not take dramatic or organized forms to be politically significant. His emphasis on everyday practices and informal strategies opened new possibilities for understanding how power operates and how communities respond to domination.

Scott’s framework has proven particularly valuable for understanding certain forms of community response to authority. The concept of hidden transcripts reveals how subordinate groups maintain critical perspectives on power relations while strategically managing what they express in public settings. The distinction between public and hidden transcripts helps explain why communities may appear to acquiesce to authority in certain contexts while developing alternative narratives in others. The recognition that subordinate groups simultaneously inhabit multiple discursive registers has enriched our understanding of how power operates through everyday interactions rather than only through spectacular confrontations.

However, Scott’s framework also reveals certain limitations when applied to contexts where communities engage authority through processes more complex than simple concealment or opposition. The binary distinction between public transcripts (what subordinates say in the presence of power) and hidden transcripts (what they say behind power’s back) may not fully capture situations where communities strategically navigate

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<sup>32</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xvi.

<sup>33</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xii.



between multiple frameworks of legitimacy, each requiring different forms of engagement. Moreover, the emphasis on concealment as the primary strategy of the weak may overlook contexts where subordinate groups create new public discourses that transform rather than simply invert existing power relations. These limitations have prompted scholars to develop more nuanced frameworks for understanding agency and power.

Lila Abu-Lughod's influential critique of what she terms "the romance of resistance" provides crucial theoretical refinement. Abu-Lughod argues that anthropologists have often romanticized resistance, treating it as evidence of human freedom or agency while overlooking how acts of resistance are themselves shaped by and reinforce existing power relations.<sup>34</sup> Her ethnographic work with Bedouin women demonstrates that resistance should be used as a "diagnostic of power" rather than celebrated as liberation. When women employ specific forms of resistance, their actions reveal the particular configurations of power that constrain them. This perspective proves invaluable for understanding how responses to authority operate within rather than outside existing power structures. Rather than viewing resistance as escape from power, Abu-Lughod's framework reveals how resistance confirms power's operation and may even reinforce the very structures being contested.

This embedded understanding of resistance has important implications for analyzing religious contexts. When communities respond to religious authority, their strategies necessarily operate within frameworks that religious discourse itself provides. Arguments about proper Islamic practice, even when they challenge particular interpretations, typically reinforce Islam's centrality as the primary framework for legitimation. Abu-Lughod's insights suggest we should attend carefully to how communities' responses to religious authority simultaneously contest specific claims while confirming broader structures of

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<sup>34</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 41–55.

religious legitimacy. This recognition shifts analysis from asking whether communities successfully resist authority to examining how their responses reveal and potentially transform the operations of power.

David Scott's examination of rituals as sites of political and ideological struggle adds another essential dimension to understanding power and agency in postcolonial contexts.<sup>35</sup> Scott argues that seemingly traditional practices often become reconfigured as modern political instruments through which different groups compete to define collective identity and political futures. His analysis reveals how rituals serve as arenas where competing visions of community, nation, and belonging are articulated and contested. Rather than treating traditional practices as static inheritances from the past, Scott's framework illuminates how they become sites of ongoing struggle over meaning and authority. This perspective proves particularly valuable for understanding how practices that appear purely cultural or religious actually function as political resources through which communities negotiate their positions within broader power structures.

Scott's work suggests that what appears as conflict over ritual propriety often involves deeper struggles over the rationalities that organize collective life. When religious authorities criticize certain practices and communities defend them, these debates may involve competing visions of what proper Muslim community should look like, how tradition should relate to modernity, and who possesses authority to determine authentic practice. Understanding these dynamics requires analyzing not just explicit arguments but the underlying frameworks through which different actors understand legitimate practice and proper authority.

Asef Bayat's concept of "quiet encroachment" offers particularly valuable insights for understanding how

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<sup>35</sup> David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3–20.

marginalized populations advance their interests through incremental rather than confrontational strategies. Based on his analysis of urban poor in Middle Eastern cities, Bayat describes quiet encroachment as “the silent, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives.”<sup>36</sup> Unlike organized social movements or dramatic protests, quiet encroachment proceeds through countless small actions that individually appear modest but collectively transform situations. Marginalized groups gradually expand their presence, establish new practices, and create facts on the ground without necessarily articulating explicit demands or engaging in direct confrontation with authorities.

Bayat’s framework proves particularly illuminating for understanding contexts where direct confrontation would prove counterproductive but where communities nonetheless seek to maintain agency. Quiet encroachment succeeds precisely because it avoids moments that would require authorities to choose between maintaining face and accepting change. By proceeding incrementally and avoiding explicit challenges, communities can gradually expand what becomes accepted practice without forcing dramatic confrontations. This patient, cumulative approach may prove more effective than direct opposition for achieving substantive changes in situations where power relations strongly favor authorities.

Mona Lilja’s recent theoretical interventions provide important advances in understanding resistance beyond binary frameworks. Lilja critiques resistance studies for establishing problematic divisions between individual and collective resistance, and between hidden and public forms of dissent. She proposes instead more nuanced categorizations that recognize how different forms of resistance interconnect and reinforce each other. Most significantly, Lilja develops the concept of

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<sup>36</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 56.

“constructive resistance,” which she argues “transcends the whole phenomenon of being against something; instead, it constructs ‘alternative’ or ‘prefigurative’ social institutions or discourses.”<sup>37</sup> This conceptualization moves beyond understanding resistance primarily as opposition to reveal how communities create new possibilities while engaging with existing power structures.

Lilja’s emphasis on how “resistance actively engages with power through a combination of avoidance, breaking resistance and/or the construction of alternative subjectivities, narratives and communities” illuminates resistance as creative rather than merely reactive. Her concept of “resistance formations” examines how “different resistance practices, when amassed or entangled, take on a particular shape of their own.”<sup>38</sup> This framework helps explain how various strategies employed by different actors within communities may operate not as isolated responses but as interconnected elements within broader patterns of engagement with authority.

Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of symbolic power and social fields provides additional analytical resources for understanding how domination operates through cultural and symbolic means.<sup>39</sup> His concept of the “field” (*champ*) as a structured social space where different actors compete for legitimacy and resources according to specific rules and forms of capital proves particularly relevant for understanding strategic action.<sup>40</sup> Different fields operate according to different logics and value different forms of capital. Success in navigating power relations often depends on understanding which fields offer favorable terrain and how to shift debates between different fields. Bourdieu’s emphasis on the

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<sup>37</sup> Mona Lilja, “The Definition of Resistance,” *Journal of Political Power* 15, no. 2 (2022): 202–20.

<sup>38</sup> Lilja.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58.

<sup>40</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups,” *Theory and Society* 14, no. 6 (1985): 723–44.

embodied nature of cultural reproduction and resistance also illuminates how communities maintain practices through practical engagement rather than ideological opposition alone.

Saba Mahmood's ethnographic study of women's mosque movement in Egypt demonstrates how religious subjects can exercise agency through creative engagement with traditional Islamic practices rather than through rejection of religious authority.<sup>41</sup> Her analysis challenges conventional notions of agency that equate it with resistance to domination, showing instead how agency can operate through inhabitation and transformation of traditional forms. Mahmood's work proves particularly relevant for understanding how Muslim communities navigate religious authority, revealing that creative engagement with Islamic tradition represents a form of agency rather than simple compliance with domination.

Together, these diverse theoretical perspectives reveal several important insights about how communities maintain agency within structures of constraint. First, resistance and engagement exist along a continuum rather than as binary opposites. Communities rarely simply oppose or simply accept authority; instead they negotiate, accommodate, transform, and creatively engage with power relations in complex ways. Second, effective responses to authority often work within rather than against existing frameworks, employing dominant discourses strategically rather than rejecting them entirely. Third, incremental and cumulative strategies may prove more effective than dramatic confrontations for achieving substantive changes in power relations. Fourth, understanding agency requires attention to how communities create new possibilities and discourses, not just how they oppose existing structures.

However, applying these insights to Muslim societies requires careful attention to the specific dynamics of religious authority and Islamic frameworks. How do communities maintain agency

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<sup>41</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

when religious discourse claims comprehensive authority over proper practice? What strategies prove effective for preserving cultural traditions when religious authorities criticize them as un-Islamic? How do negotiations operate in contexts where multiple sources of authority intersect, including religious scholars, customary leaders, and state institutions? The scholarship on resistance and power provides valuable analytical tools, but understanding agency in Islamic contexts requires frameworks that attend specifically to how religious authority operates and how communities engage with Islamic discourse.

The Indonesian context presents particularly complex terrain for understanding these dynamics. Indonesia's recognition of both Islamic law and customary law creates conditions where communities can draw upon multiple frameworks for authorizing practices. The intersection of religious authority, customary leadership, and state administration generates spaces for negotiation that may not exist in contexts where religious authority operates more monopolistically. Understanding how Indonesian Muslim communities maintain cultural practices while navigating religious criticism requires analytical frameworks that can capture negotiations operating simultaneously through religious, cultural, and administrative registers.

These considerations point toward the need for theoretical approaches that synthesize insights from resistance studies while attending specifically to how negotiations operate within Islamic contexts. Such approaches would recognize that communities employ strategies for maintaining practices they understand as both Islamic and cultural, strategies that respect religious authority while creating space for what they identify as local tradition. The challenge lies in developing frameworks that capture the full complexity of how power, authority, and agency operate when communities navigate between multiple sources of legitimacy while maintaining commitments to Islamic identity and values.



#### 4. Creative Negotiation within Local Islamic Tradition

The concept of creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition that I develop through my analysis of the *Balimau* case represents a theoretical contribution that emerges from the intersection of these three scholarly conversations. This concept builds upon but extends existing frameworks in resistance studies by examining how Islamic communities employ complex strategies of cultural innovation that respect established boundaries while generating new possibilities for practice within specifically local Islamic frameworks.

Building on the insights from the resistance scholarship discussed above, I synthesize multiple theoretical perspectives to develop an integrated framework. From James Scott's work, I draw the foundational understanding of how subordinate groups employ everyday tactics to assert their interests without direct confrontation.<sup>42</sup> From Lila Abu-Lughod's critique, I adopt the crucial insight that negotiation should be understood as embedded within rather than external to power relations, serving as a diagnostic of how power operates rather than as evidence of liberation from it.<sup>43</sup> From David Scott's analysis, I incorporate the recognition that rituals function as sites where competing political rationalities and visions of collective identity are negotiated and contested.<sup>44</sup> From Asef Bayat's concept of quiet encroachment, I take the emphasis on how incremental, non-confrontational actions by marginalized actors can cumulatively transform social conditions.<sup>45</sup> And from Mona Lilja's framework, I adopt the understanding that negotiation can transcend simple opposition to construct alternative legitimating discourses and institutional arrangements.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, xvi.

<sup>43</sup> Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women."

<sup>44</sup> Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, 115–17.

<sup>45</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 56.

<sup>46</sup> Lilja, "The Definition of Resistance," 202–20.

However, the *Balimau* case reveals that these frameworks, while invaluable, require specific adaptation to capture the dynamics of local Islamic tradition. Unlike Scott's everyday resistance, which operates through covert tactics and hidden transcripts that remain "spoken behind the back of the dominant,"<sup>47</sup> the negotiation I observed in Kuntu often involved strategic reframing that transformed public discourse rather than concealing dissent. Unlike Bayat's quiet encroachment, which emphasizes "silent, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement" through largely atomized actions,<sup>48</sup> the *Balimau* strategies included explicit innovation that actively reshaped the terms of legitimate debate. And unlike Lilja's constructive resistance, which constructs "alternative or prefigurative social institutions or discourses" alongside existing ones,<sup>49</sup> creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition works within rather than alongside established local Islamic frameworks, transforming them from within through engagement with Islamic argumentative structures.

The specific dynamics of Islamic tradition create conditions that distinguish creative negotiation from these other forms. As discussed in the previous section, Islam maintains coherence through ongoing arguments about proper practice, with multiple authorities competing to define correct Islamic observance.<sup>50</sup> This creates opportunities for creative engagement that differ from contexts where power operates through more unified or secular frameworks. When community members in Kuntu repositioned *Balimau* as cultural identity rather than religious obligation, they did not reject Islamic authority but rather deployed alternative categories within Islamic thought to create autonomous space for what they identify as cultural practice. This represents a form of negotiation that Abu-Lughod helps us recognize as embedded

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<sup>47</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, xii.

<sup>48</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Lilja, "The Definition of Resistance," 210.

<sup>50</sup> Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14.

within Islamic power relations,<sup>51</sup> that David Scott helps us see as negotiating competing political rationalities through ritual performance,<sup>52</sup> and that Bayat helps us understand as advancing community interests through persistent practice.<sup>53</sup>

Creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition operates through several key mechanisms that distinguish it from both general resistance frameworks and specific forms like Scott's everyday resistance or Lilja's constructive resistance. First, it works through strategic reframing that employs Islamic discourse itself rather than avoiding or constructing alternatives to it. When Kuntu youth declared "*Balimau* is our cultural identity," they were not hiding their resistance behind false compliance as Scott's hidden transcripts might suggest, nor were they constructing parallel alternative institutions as Lilja's framework emphasizes. Instead, they were strategically repositioning the tradition within alternative legitimating categories that remained recognizably Islamic, demonstrating what Abu-Lughod identifies as resistance embedded within the very power structures it navigates.<sup>54</sup>

Second, creative negotiation develops new ways of talking about, framing, and justifying traditional practices that maintain respect for established authority while creating possibilities for continued practice. This differs from Scott's covert tactics, which emphasize "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance" and other forms of concealed opposition,<sup>55</sup> in that it transforms public discourse rather than operating behind the scenes. It differs from Bayat's quiet encroachment in that it involves explicit argumentation rather than silent action. And it differs from Lilja's constructive resistance in that it works within rather than

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<sup>51</sup> Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women."

<sup>52</sup> Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, 115–17.

<sup>53</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 56.

<sup>54</sup> Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women."

<sup>55</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, xvi.

alongside existing local Islamic frameworks, employing established modes of Islamic reasoning to achieve innovative outcomes.<sup>56</sup> What David Scott's analysis helps us see is how this discursive innovation transforms ritual practice itself into a site where competing visions of Islamic authenticity and community identity are actively negotiated, with rituals becoming "arenas where different groups compete to define collective identity and political futures."<sup>57</sup>

Third, creative negotiation generates productive synthesis rather than simple accommodation or opposition. The *Balimau* tradition that emerged from the 2017 crisis bore the marks of both religious criticism and community negotiation, representing neither unchanged continuation nor complete transformation but rather creative adaptation that preserved essential meanings while adapting specific forms. This represents what might be called, building on Bayat's insights, a form of cumulative cultural encroachment where persistent practice gradually normalizes what authorities initially problematized.<sup>58</sup> Yet unlike Bayat's emphasis on silent advancement, this synthesis involved explicit negotiation that Lilja helps us recognize as constructing new legitimating frameworks,<sup>59</sup> while Abu-Lughod's critique reminds us to understand this construction as operating within rather than transcending Islamic power relations.<sup>60</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic power and social fields provides additional insights into how these mechanisms operate. His concept of the "field" (*champ*) as a structured social space where different actors compete for legitimacy according to specific rules proves particularly relevant for understanding how youth organizers strategically shifted the *Balimau* debate from the religious field, where they lacked authority, to the cultural field,

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<sup>56</sup> Lilja, "The Definition of Resistance."

<sup>57</sup> Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, 115–17.

<sup>58</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 56.

<sup>59</sup> Lilja, "The Definition of Resistance," 210.

<sup>60</sup> Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women."

where they possessed greater advantages.<sup>61</sup> This strategic field shifting represents a sophisticated form of resistance that combines elements from all the scholars discussed above while operating through the particular constraints and possibilities of local Islamic tradition.

The principle *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* functions as the primary analytical lens for understanding how these mechanisms operate in practice. This principle establishes the hierarchical relationship between different sources of authority while simultaneously creating space for legitimate cultural practice within Islamic frameworks. My analysis reveals how this principle operates not as a fixed formula but as a dynamic framework for ongoing negotiation that navigates through the sophisticated strategies I observed during fieldwork.

The concept of creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition thus provides analytical tools for examining how Islamic communities navigate between textual authorities and practical necessities while maintaining respectful engagement with established frameworks. It integrates insights from multiple resistance scholars: Scott's attention to everyday tactics and hidden transcripts,<sup>62</sup> Abu-Lughod's diagnostic approach to power embedded within resistance,<sup>63</sup> David Scott's analysis of ritual as political struggle,<sup>64</sup> Bayat's emphasis on incremental action and quiet encroachment,<sup>65</sup> and Lilja's framework of constructive resistance,<sup>66</sup> while specifying how these dynamics operate within the particular constraints and possibilities of local Islamic tradition. These insights have implications that extend beyond the immediate context of Kuntu to broader questions about religious

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<sup>61</sup> Bourdieu, "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," 723–44.

<sup>62</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, xvi; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, xii.

<sup>63</sup> Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women."

<sup>64</sup> Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, 115–17.

<sup>65</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 56.

<sup>66</sup> Lilja, "The Definition of Resistance."

authority, cultural change, and creative agency in Muslim societies.

Finally, my analysis contributes to broader scholarly conversations about the relationship between religious authority and cultural innovation in contemporary Muslim societies. The *Balimau* case demonstrates that Islamic tradition maintains vitality through productive tension and creative negotiation rather than rigid orthodoxy, offering important insights for understanding how contemporary Islamic societies balance continuity and change while preserving meaningful connections to Islamic history and identity. Creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition thus represents not a challenge to Islamic authority but rather a mechanism through which Islamic traditions remain dynamic and responsive to changing circumstances while maintaining essential continuities with the past.

#### **D. Theoretical Framework**

This research employs an integrated theoretical approach that combines symbolic interpretation with power analysis to understand how Islamic traditions maintain vitality through creative adaptation. The theoretical foundation draws upon two primary anthropological approaches: Clifford Geertz's interpretive framework emphasizing culture as essentially semiotic, and Talal Asad's power-focused analysis that examines how authority shapes religious practice formation.<sup>67</sup> Following Stephen S. Bush's argument that adequate religious analysis requires both symbolic meaning and power relations without subordinating one to the other, this dissertation demonstrates that understanding Islamic traditions necessitates attention to both what practices mean and how they operate within power structures.<sup>68</sup> As Kurniawan establishes in his Banten research, symbolic meaning

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<sup>67</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1973), 110; Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen S Bush, "Are Meaning the Name of the Game? Religion as Symbolic Meaning and Religion as Power," *Religion Compass* 6, no. 12 (2012): 526.



makers and interpreters of ritual symbols are precisely those who possess power over traditional existence and transformation.<sup>69</sup>

The distinction between symbolic and post-structural approaches is not merely methodological but fundamentally shapes how we understand religious practice. Symbolic anthropology, exemplified by Geertz's thick description, treats culture as a web of meanings that anthropologists must interpret. This approach has contributed valuable insights into how religious symbols create coherent worldviews. However, as Asad convincingly argues, focusing solely on meaning neglects how power determines which meanings become authoritative and which remain marginal.<sup>70</sup> In the *balimau* case, understanding the *limau* (citrus) fruit's symbolic significance matters less than analyzing how different actors mobilize competing interpretations of its meaning to advance their interests. The question is not "what does the *limau* symbolize?" but "who has the authority to determine its proper symbolic interpretation, and how do others contest or accommodate that authority?"

Talal Asad's reconceptualization of Islam provides valuable context for understanding how Islamic communities maintain coherence across diverse practices. His influential insight that Islamic tradition consists of "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice" emphasizes that traditions maintain vitality through ongoing arguments about proper practice rather than rigid orthodoxy.<sup>71</sup> Crucially, as Asad notes, "argument and conflict over the form and significance of practices are therefore a natural part of any Islamic tradition."<sup>72</sup> This recognition that debate and negotiation constitute natural features of Islamic tradition rather than signs of its breakdown provides important grounding for my analysis. The *balimau* tradition

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<sup>69</sup> Kurniawan, "Cultural Negotiation, Authority, and Discursive Tradition: The Wawacan Seh Ritual in Banten."

<sup>70</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, 27–54.

<sup>71</sup> Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Asad, 14.

operates within this broader Islamic context where arguments about proper practice represent normal rather than exceptional dynamics.

However, my ethnographic encounter with *balimau* revealed that Islamic traditions can maintain coherence and operate through Islamic frameworks without necessarily centering on textual debates in the way that Asad's discursive tradition model anticipates. The arguments I observed in Kuntu about *balimau*'s legitimacy did not primarily reference Qur'anic verses, hadith collections, or classical legal texts. Instead, I found community members invoking the local Islamic principle of "*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*" (custom is based on sharia, and sharia is grounded on the holy Quran). This observation pushed me toward developing a framework for understanding what I term local Islamic traditions: practices that operate within Islamic contexts and employ locally grounded Islamic reasoning without necessarily engaging in the scriptural hermeneutics that characterize Asad's discursive tradition.

The central theoretical framework of this dissertation focuses on understanding negotiation within local Islamic tradition. Local Islamic traditions, as I observed them in Kuntu, maintain their Islamic character through ongoing engagement with Islamic principles and values while remaining embedded in specific cultural contexts and social relationships. These traditions create space for negotiation not through reference to foundational texts but through dynamic interaction between multiple sources of authority, including religious scholars, customary leaders, government officials, and community members themselves. Understanding how this negotiation operates requires attention to the specific frameworks that structure legitimate debate and authorize particular practices within local contexts.

In Kuntu, the principle *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* (custom is based on Islamic law, Islamic law is based on the Quran) functions as the primary framework through which communities negotiate between cultural practice and religious authority. This principle establishes a hierarchical relationship between different sources of authority while simultaneously creating space for legitimate cultural practice within local Islamic frameworks.

My analysis reveals how this principle operates not as a fixed formula requiring textual interpretation but as a dynamic negotiation framework that different actors deploy strategically to advance their positions. Religious authorities invoke it to emphasize Islamic law's primacy over custom, while community members invoke it to demonstrate that their customs ultimately derive legitimacy from Islamic principles. The principle's power lies precisely in its flexibility, its capacity to authorize multiple positions while maintaining all parties' commitment to what they believe as Islamic frameworks.

This negotiation framework differs significantly from discursive tradition in several crucial respects. First, it operates through culturally embedded reasoning rather than primarily textual interpretation. Second, negotiation within local Islamic tradition involves multiple fields of legitimacy beyond the religious field alone. Community members strategically shifted debates about *balimau* between religious, cultural, and administrative domains, recognizing that different fields offered different possibilities for authorizing their practices. Third, this negotiation proceeds through what I observed as productive incompleteness, where religious authorities deliberately leave interpretive space through calculated ambiguity rather than issuing definitive rulings. This incompleteness enables ongoing negotiation rather than requiring resolution through textual interpretation.

Understanding how power operates within these negotiation processes requires analytical tools that capture both constraint and agency, both structure and creativity. The scholarship on resistance and power dynamics provides essential frameworks for analyzing how communities maintain agency within structures of authority. James Scott's foundational work on everyday forms of resistance reveals how relatively powerless groups assert their interests through strategies like "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance" and develop "hidden transcripts" as critiques of power spoken behind the

back of the dominant.<sup>73</sup> These insights prove valuable for understanding certain aspects of community responses in Kuntu, particularly the informal critiques that emerged in private conversations. However, Scott's framework also illuminates dynamics that exceed simple opposition. The concept of public and hidden transcripts reveals not merely concealment but strategic management of multiple discourses, what we might understand as careful negotiation between different audiences and different registers of legitimacy.

Lila Abu-Lughod's critique of "the romance of resistance" provides crucial theoretical refinement by demonstrating that resistance should be used as a "diagnostic of power" rather than celebrated as liberation.<sup>74</sup> Abu-Lughod's insight that acts of resistance are themselves shaped by and reinforce existing power relations proves invaluable for understanding negotiation in Kuntu. When youth organizers responded to religious criticism, their strategies did not operate outside local Islamic frameworks but rather confirmed local Islam's centrality as the primary framework for legitimation. This embedded nature of negotiation, far from representing weakness, actually explains its effectiveness. By working within rather than against Islamic discourse, community members maintain respectful engagement while creating space for what they identify as cultural practice.

David Scott's examination of rituals as sites of political and ideological struggle adds another essential dimension by revealing how seemingly traditional practices become reconfigured as modern political instruments.<sup>75</sup> Scott's framework illuminates how struggles over ritual operate through negotiation rather than simple conflict. When religious authorities frame *balimau* as deviation from proper Islamic practice, and youth organizers reframe it as cultural heritage,

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<sup>73</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, xvi; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, xii.

<sup>74</sup> Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," 41–55.

<sup>75</sup> David Scott, "Ritual, Power, and Colonial Domination: On the Reception and Appropriation of Christianity in the Lower Congo," *Social Analysis* 39 (1996): 1–34.

they engage in negotiation over the terms through which tradition gains legitimacy. Neither party seeks to eliminate the other's position entirely; rather, both navigate toward frameworks that allow coexistence and continued engagement.

Mona Lilja's concept of "constructive resistance" proves particularly relevant for understanding creative negotiation. Lilja argues that constructive resistance "transcends the whole phenomenon of being against something; instead it constructs 'alternative' or 'prefigurative' social institutions or discourses." This conceptualization illuminates how Kuntu youth did not simply oppose religious authority but rather created new legitimating frameworks that preserved cultural practice while respecting Islamic discourse. Lilja's emphasis on how resistance actively engages with power through combinations of different strategies provides theoretical foundation for understanding negotiation as active, creative engagement.<sup>76</sup>

Asef Bayat's concept of "quiet encroachment" offers valuable insights for understanding negotiation as gradual, incremental process. Bayat describes quiet encroachment as "the silent, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives."<sup>77</sup> In Kuntu, I observed remarkably similar patterns as community members gradually expanded *balimau* practices despite official restrictions. This quiet encroachment represents negotiation operating through patient accumulation rather than dramatic confrontation. Each small adjustment tested boundaries, assessed responses, and gradually expanded what was possible without requiring authorities to explicitly reverse their positions.

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the "field" (*champ*) as a structured social space where different actors compete for legitimacy and resources proves particularly relevant for understanding strategic navigation.<sup>78</sup> Youth organizers strategically shifted the *balimau* debate

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<sup>76</sup> Lilja, "The Definition of Resistance."

<sup>77</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 56.

<sup>78</sup> Bourdieu, "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," 723–44.

from the religious field, where they lacked authority, to the cultural field, where they possessed greater advantages through educational backgrounds and familiarity with governmental discourse. This strategic field-shifting represents creative negotiation, recognizing that different frameworks offer different possibilities for legitimation and that successful navigation requires understanding which fields offer favorable terrain.

Synthesizing these diverse theoretical insights, I develop the concept of “creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition” as this dissertation’s central analytical framework. Creative negotiation operates through three key mechanisms that emerged from my ethnographic analysis. First, strategic reframing employs Islamic discourse itself rather than avoiding or opposing it, repositioning practices within alternative legitimating categories. When youth organizers declared “*balimau* is our cultural identity,” they did not reject Islamic frameworks but rather shifted the register through which the tradition gained legitimacy, from religious correctness to cultural authenticity. This reframing respected religious authority’s domain while accessing alternative sources of legitimation.

Second, discursive innovation develops new approaches for justifying traditional practices that maintain respect for established authority while creating possibilities for continued practice. Rather than engaging in theological debates they lacked authority to win, community members developed vernacular Islamic reasoning that connected *balimau* to general Islamic values like community solidarity. This innovation operated within Islamic frameworks while avoiding direct confrontation with scholarly interpretations.

Third, productive synthesis generates creative adaptation that preserves essential meanings while transforming specific forms. The *balimau* tradition that emerged from the 2017 crisis maintained its core social functions of community bonding and Ramadan preparation while adapting specific practices to address religious concerns. This synthesis succeeded because it operated through negotiation rather than requiring victory or defeat for any party.



Creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition differs fundamentally from binary resistance. Rather than opposing authority, it engages multiple sources of legitimacy strategically. Rather than hiding dissent, it reframes public discourse. Rather than seeking to overturn power relations, it generates new possibilities within existing structures. This form of negotiation proves effective precisely because it respects established boundaries while creating space for innovation and enables transformation without requiring explicit reversals of authority.

The theoretical framework also incorporates insights from the anthropology of Islam regarding how Muslims navigate between textual authority and lived practice. As John Bowen demonstrates in his analysis of Islamic argumentation in Indonesia, Muslims employ strategies for reconciling local customs with Islamic requirements through processes of reasoning that draw upon multiple sources of authority.<sup>79</sup> This perspective helps explain how Kuntu residents construct arguments that preserve what they identify as cultural practices while maintaining Islamic legitimacy. The framework attends as well to the role of the state and its intersection with religious and customary authority. Following Michael Peletz's analysis of Islamic judicial processes in Malaysia, I examine how state institutions mediate between competing claims about proper Islamic practice, creating additional layers of complexity in how traditions are authorized, contested, and transformed.<sup>80</sup> The Indonesian state's recognition of both Islamic law and customary law creates unique conditions for creative negotiation that operates through strategic navigation between different legal and administrative frameworks.

This integrated theoretical approach provides analytical tools for understanding how the *balimau* tradition has maintained vitality despite challenges from religious authorities. The framework reveals negotiation as a form of agency that operates through strategic

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<sup>79</sup> John R. Bowen, *Islam, Law and Equality in Indonesia: An Anthropology of Public Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>80</sup> Michael G. Peletz, *Islamic Modern: Religious Courts and Cultural Politics in Malaysia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

engagement with multiple sources of authority, creative reframing that generates new possibilities for practice, and patient accumulation of incremental changes that transform traditions while maintaining respectful engagement with established frameworks. Through this lens, I analyze how different actors in Kuntu deployed various strategies to shape *balimau*'s evolution, revealing the complex dynamics through which local Islamic traditions maintain coherence and adapt to changing circumstances.

## E. Method

This study employs an ethnographic research method to examine and understand the *Balimau* tradition within the Kuntu community. The methodological approach draws upon established frameworks for qualitative social research in religious studies, which emphasize that qualitative research in religious contexts requires sustained engagement with community perspectives to understand how religious practices operate within specific social and cultural frameworks.<sup>81</sup> The ethnographic method recognizes that understanding religious traditions involves constructing narratives about the communities we study, as Edward M. Bruner observes: "ethnographies are guided by an implicit narrative structure, by a story we tell about the peoples we study."<sup>82</sup> This research embraces the narrative dimension of ethnographic work while maintaining rigorous analytical standards to reveal the indigenous perspectives and complex social dynamics surrounding the *Balimau* tradition.

The ethnographic method proves particularly appropriate for understanding how communities negotiate between religious authority and cultural preservation, as it enables deep engagement with the meanings that community members attach to their practices. Through sustained fieldwork, I identify and analyze the significance behind each approach that the Kuntu people adopt toward what they identify

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<sup>81</sup> Moh Soehada, *Metode Penelitian Sosial Kualitatif Untuk Studi Agama*, Edisi Revisi (Yogyakarta: SUKA-Press, 2018), 114.

<sup>82</sup> Edward M. Bruner, "Ethnography as Narrative," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 139.

as their tradition. These meanings manifest through spoken discourse and embodied practices within the research setting. However, a culture must be understood from the perspective of those who live within it rather than through researcher speculation, which can lead to significant data distortion.<sup>83</sup> The research must therefore be conducted conscientiously and comprehensively to reveal indigenous perspectives on acquired knowledge and how this knowledge interprets experience and generates social behavior.<sup>84</sup>

The methodological framework acknowledges that ethnographic discourse occupies a unique position among scholarly forms, as Roland Barthes suggests that “of all learned discourse, the ethnological seems to come closest to a fiction.”<sup>85</sup> This observation does not diminish the validity of ethnographic findings but rather highlights the interpretive and narrative dimensions inherent in representing cultural practices and social dynamics. The research therefore employs reflexive approaches that recognize the constructed nature of ethnographic knowledge while maintaining analytical rigor.

### 1. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

My position as a researcher in this study requires explicit acknowledgment, as it carries significant methodological and epistemological implications for understanding the *Balimau* tradition in Kuntu. I was born in Kuntu and grew up there until completing elementary school, which provided me with foundational cultural knowledge and social connections that proved invaluable throughout this research. Although I have not resided permanently in Kuntu since childhood, I have maintained strong ties to the community, returning almost annually and

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<sup>83</sup> James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, 35th ed. (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 3–4.

<sup>84</sup> Soehada, *Metode Penelitian Sosial Kualitatif Untuk Studi Agama, Edisi Revisi*, 114.

<sup>85</sup> This quote has become widely cited in ethnographic literature; see for example Robert Tierney, “Violence, Borders, Identity: An Ethnographic Narrative Set in Colonial Taiwan,” in *Reading Colonial Japan: Text, Context, and Critique*, ed. Michele M. Mason and Helen J. S. Lee (California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 124.

sustaining close relationships with family members, village elders, community youth, traditional leaders, religious scholars, and local officials.

This insider positioning presents both advantages and challenges that fundamentally shaped my research approach. As Kirin Narayan observes, the dichotomy between “native” and “non-native” anthropologists oversimplifies the complex dynamics of cultural belonging and research relationships.<sup>86</sup> My familiarity with local customs, language nuances, and social networks enabled me to access conversations and observations that might remain closed to complete outsiders. Community members often spoke with me using cultural references and assumptions that they might have needed to explain more carefully to researchers without shared cultural background. This insider knowledge allowed me to recognize the subtle ways community members modulated their discussions about *Balimau* depending on their audience, which became crucial for understanding the strategic silences and calculated ambiguities that characterize public discourse about the tradition.

However, my insider status also required careful navigation to maintain analytical objectivity. As someone with deep personal connections to Kuntu, I recognized the potential for my own cultural investments to influence my interpretation of community dynamics. Following the reflexive ethnographic framework developed by Ruth Behar, I approached this research with constant attention to how my own positionality shaped both my access to information and my analytical perspective.<sup>87</sup> I positioned myself as objectively as possible by employing rigorous academic analytical frameworks, deliberately avoiding taking sides in debates between supporters and critics of the *Balimau* tradition. This required maintaining what Paul Rabinow

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<sup>86</sup> Kirin Narayan, “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?,” *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 671–86.

<sup>87</sup> Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 5–19.

describes as “anthropological consciousness” that remains alert to the ways personal biography intersects with scientific inquiry.<sup>88</sup>

The methodological strategy I developed involved consciously shifting between two related but distinct roles. When conducting formal analysis and writing, I maintained scholarly distance, applying theoretical frameworks from anthropology, Islamic studies, and resistance studies to interpret community practices and discourses. During fieldwork interactions, however, I immersed myself fully in community life, participating in ritual preparations, attending social gatherings, and engaging in informal conversations as a community member rather than purely as a researcher. This dual positioning enabled me to understand both the explicit public presentations of *Balimau* and the more nuanced private discussions that reveal the creative resistance strategies employed by community members.

The epistemological implications of this insider positionality extend beyond questions of access and rapport. My cultural competence allowed me to recognize forms of knowledge and meaning-making that operate through what James C. Scott calls “hidden transcripts” - the critiques of power that take place beyond direct observation by powerholders.<sup>89</sup> Community members often expressed complex positions about *Balimau* through indirect communication, cultural allusions, and strategic silences that required insider cultural knowledge to interpret accurately. This positioned me to develop what might be termed an “ethnography of the unsaid” that captures forms of resistance and negotiation not immediately visible through conventional ethnographic methods.

The quality of data collection and analysis benefited significantly from this positionality. My established relationships enabled me to conduct extended, in-depth interviews with community members who spoke candidly about sensitive topics

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<sup>88</sup> Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 38–39.

<sup>89</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 4–8.

related to religious authority and cultural authenticity. Informants often provided context and background information that enriched my understanding of contemporary debates by connecting them to longer historical patterns and family memories. The trust developed through years of relationship building allowed me to observe private discussions and informal interactions that revealed the sophisticated strategies community members employ to navigate between competing claims about proper Islamic practice.

This insider positioning ultimately enhanced rather than compromised the analytical quality of this research. By combining intimate cultural knowledge with rigorous scholarly methods, I was able to produce an ethnographic account that captures both the explicit public dimensions of *Balimau* practice and the subtle forms of creative resistance that sustain the tradition despite ongoing contestation. The resulting analysis reflects the complex realities of how communities negotiate between religious authority and cultural preservation, demonstrating how anthropological inquiry benefits from researchers who can move fluidly between participation and observation while maintaining analytical clarity about the implications of their own cultural positioning.

## 2. Research Timeline

When I first arrived in Kuntu in 2021 to begin sustained fieldwork, I was struck by how community members carefully modulated their discussions about the *Balimau* tradition depending on who was present during conversations. This observation led me to recognize that understanding the creative resistance strategies employed by the community required methodological approaches capable of capturing not only explicit statements but also strategic silences and calculated ambiguities that shaped community discourse about religious authority and cultural practice.



This investigation builds upon preliminary research conducted since 2015, when I first encountered the *Balimau* tradition during master's studies. That initial research focused on understanding community values regarding the tradition within the context of living Islamic practice, which I used to argue that the tradition could serve as historical evidence.<sup>90</sup> The current research represents a comprehensive follow-up study examining the phenomenon of *Balimau* tradition in greater depth, particularly the complex social dynamics that emerged during the 2017 controversy.

From 2015 to 2018, I conducted preliminary observations of the *Balimau* tradition implementation in Kuntu Village, Kampar Kiri Subdistrict, Kampar Regency, Riau. During this period, I observed significant variations in event organization, community leadership involvement, visitor attendance, and other details of this annual tradition. These observations revealed dynamic social changes occurring within *Balimau* implementation, ranging from celebrations attracting large crowds including foreign tourists to much quieter community observances. Throughout this period, I found that the tradition continued despite ongoing internal community debates.

The intensive fieldwork phase occurred from 2021 to 2024, during which I conducted sustained ethnographic research focused on understanding the authority dynamics and creative resistance strategies that emerged following the 2017 crisis. This extended engagement enabled me to reconstruct the pivotal events through witness accounts and community testimonies while analyzing contemporary negotiations between different social actors.

### 3. Location of Study

The research was conducted primarily in Kampar Kiri District, Kampar Regency, Riau Province, with the *Balimau* tradition in

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<sup>90</sup> Iballa, "Tradisi Mandi Balimau Di Masyarakat Kuntu: Living Hadis Sebagai Bukti Sejarah."

Kuntu serving as the central analytical focus. The study incorporates comparative observations from several neighboring villages to understand why the *Balimau* tradition exhibits different dynamics across locations.

The *Balimau* tradition can be found throughout various areas of Sumatra, including Lampung, West Sumatra, and Riau, where it carries different names such as *Balimau*, *Mandi Balimau*, *Potang Balimau*, *Balimau Kasai*, and *Patang Megang* or *Patang Mamogang*. Despite these variations, the fundamental principle remains consistent: the culminating process of spiritual and physical cleansing at the end of Sha'ban month in preparation for entering Ramadan.

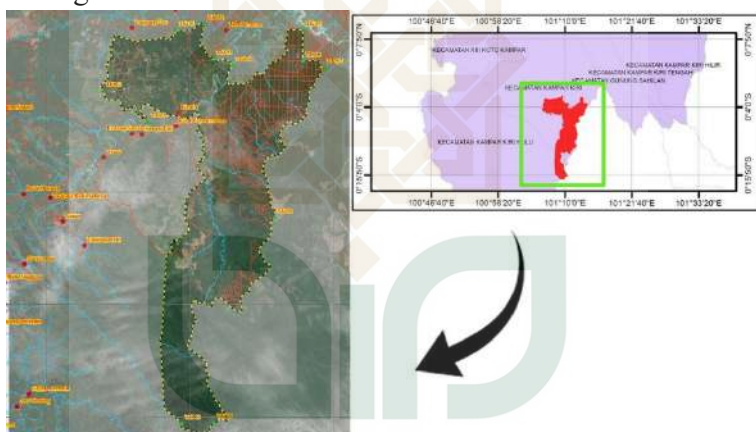


Figure A3. Map of Kuntu

The selection of Kuntu as the primary research site reflects several important considerations. The community experienced significant conflict between authorities who opposed changes to the *Balimau* tradition and youth who resisted authority refusal by insisting on maintaining the tradition's existence. This dynamic differs markedly from other areas such as Pekanbaru and Bangkinang, where local governments provide full support for *Balimau* events despite religious and traditional leaders noting value shifts in contemporary celebrations. Even Batam City has planned to include *Balimau* events in its tourist calendar. The unique resistance dynamics in Kuntu, combined with the village's

historical significance which believed as one of Riau's oldest settlements and the location of the first Islamic kingdom in the province,<sup>91</sup> make it an ideal site for examining creative resistance within Islamic discursive tradition.

#### 4. Research Informants and Sampling Strategy

This research employed purposive sampling to determine informants based on specific considerations related to the study's analytical objectives.<sup>92</sup> The approach recognized that understanding creative resistance within discursive tradition requires access to multiple perspectives from different social positions and authority relationships within the community. Given the complex nature of the *Balimau* tradition and the various stakeholder groups involved in its negotiation, I established clear criteria for selecting informants who could provide comprehensive insights into both the historical development and contemporary dynamics of the tradition.

The selection process resulted in a total of 53 informants across five distinct categories, each chosen for their specific knowledge, experience, and positioning within Kuntu's social fabric. This distribution reflects the different social actors involved in negotiations surrounding *Balimau* tradition while ensuring adequate representation of various community perspectives. I deliberately sought informants who occupied different positions within the community's power structures and who had varying degrees of investment in the tradition's continuation or transformation.

The first category of informants comprised traditional leaders in Kuntu village who possess institutional authority and traditional knowledge of the *Balimau* tradition. This group included the Khalifah of Kuntu, who serves as the customary leader with the highest traditional status in the village, alongside

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<sup>91</sup> Roza, *Sejarah Islam Riau*, 102–15.

<sup>92</sup> T Palys, "Purposive Sampling," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. L. M. Given, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 697–98.

several *Ninik Mamak* (tribal elders) representing different kinship groups within the community. The *Ninik Mamak* category encompassed both currently serving traditional leaders and former office holders whose experience spans multiple decades of social change. Together, these six informants provided crucial insights into the formal traditional interpretations of proper *Balimau* practice and the institutional perspectives on how the tradition should be maintained or adapted. Their testimonies proved essential for understanding the official traditional narrative and the strategic considerations that influence customary leadership decisions regarding *Balimau*.

The second category consisted of five elderly village members who, while not holding formal traditional offices, have witnessed significant transformations in *Balimau* practice across their lifetimes. These informants, ranging in age from their late seventies to early nineties, served as living repositories of oral history about how the tradition has evolved over time. Their perspectives offered invaluable insights into the subtle changes in ritual practice, community participation patterns, and the social meanings attributed to *Balimau* across different historical periods. I found their memories particularly rich when discussing the ways community members navigated periods of religious reform and social change, providing context for understanding contemporary creative resistance strategies.

The third category encompassed nine figures from Kuntu's religious scholarly community, representing various streams of Islamic learning and institutional affiliation. This group included formally trained religious teachers from different educational backgrounds, mosque leaders, and individuals recognized within the community for their religious knowledge and interpretive authority. The diversity within this category proved crucial for understanding the range of Islamic scholarly perspectives on *Balimau* and the internal debates within religious circles about the tradition's theological status. Some of these informants held positions that required them to publicly maintain certain stances

while privately expressing more nuanced views, which became important for analyzing the strategic ambiguities that characterize religious discourse about *Balimau*.

The fourth category included five village government officials, both currently serving and former office holders, who provided insights into the administrative and political dimensions of *Balimau* governance. These informants helped me understand how state authority intersects with traditional and religious authority in regulating community practices. Their perspectives revealed the practical challenges of implementing policies related to traditional practices and the various strategies employed by local officials to balance competing demands from different constituency groups. The inclusion of former officials proved particularly valuable for understanding how administrative approaches to *Balimau* have shifted over time and how individual officials navigate the complex relationships between state policy and community expectations.

The largest category consisted of 28 community members representing the general population of Kuntu, including 16 men and 12 women across various age groups and social positions. This group encompassed individuals with different levels of education, economic status, occupational backgrounds, and degrees of involvement in *Balimau* activities. I deliberately sought informants who represented different perspectives on the tradition, including enthusiastic supporters, cautious participants, and those who expressed reservations about certain aspects of contemporary practice. The gender distribution within this category allowed me to explore how men and women experience and interpret *Balimau* differently, revealing important dimensions of the tradition that might be overlooked in studies that focus primarily on male perspectives.

Throughout the selection process, I remained attentive to the ways different social positions shaped individuals' knowledge about and investment in *Balimau*. I sought informants whose experiences could illuminate different aspects of the tradition,

from ritual preparation and performance to community organization and theological interpretation. The sampling strategy also considered the generational dimensions of traditional knowledge, ensuring that I could trace how understanding and practice of *Balimau* have been transmitted and transformed across age cohorts.

The historical data regarding tradition emerges primarily from oral sources, as no written documentation exists specifically chronicling *Balimau* history. However, anthropological studies recognize that historical records derive not only from written documents but also from oral culture and transmission, which serve as valid historical sources for examining social traditions. Memories, testimonies, witness accounts, and knowledge transmitted across generations constitute legitimate oral history sources.<sup>93</sup> The actors in oral history include those involved in historical events either actively or passively, encompassing both primary sources who were directly involved and secondary sources who received testimony from primary participants such as family members, neighbors, and community associates.<sup>94</sup> This methodological foundation validates my reliance on informant testimonies and community narratives as primary sources for understanding the historical development and contemporary transformations of *Balimau* practice in Kuntu.

For ethical considerations and to protect informant privacy, I have employed pseudonyms for all research participants throughout this study. While many informants expressed willingness to have their real names used and some even requested attribution for their contributions, I chose to maintain consistent anonymity to avoid any potential negative consequences that might arise from their participation in this research. This decision reflects my commitment to ensuring that informants can speak freely about sensitive topics without

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<sup>93</sup> Vansina Jan, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 12.

<sup>94</sup> Sugeng Priyadi, *Sejarah Lisan* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Ombak, 2017), 61.



concern for future repercussions, particularly given the contested nature of *Balimau* within certain religious and administrative circles.

The methodological approach to working with this diverse group of informants required flexibility and cultural sensitivity. I conducted interviews in multiple languages depending on informant preferences and comfort levels, moving fluidly between Indonesian, local Malay dialects, and Minangkabau as conversational contexts demanded. Most interviews took place in informants' homes or other locations of their choosing, creating environments where they felt comfortable expressing complex and sometimes contradictory views about *Balimau*. Beyond formal interview settings, I conducted numerous informal conversations at coffee shops, along the riverside, in the mosque compound, and at the local market, where the natural flow of daily interactions often revealed more nuanced perspectives than structured interviews alone could provide. I found that many of the most revealing insights emerged through these spontaneous conversations that occurred alongside formal interview sessions, highlighting the importance of building genuine relationships rather than purely extractive research encounters.

The diversity of perspectives represented among these 53 informants proved essential for understanding the multifaceted nature of creative resistance within Islamic discursive tradition. Rather than seeking consensus or attempting to identify a single authentic interpretation of *Balimau*, I used this purposive sampling strategy to map the range of positions and strategies that different community members employ when engaging with questions about traditional practice and religious authority. This methodological approach aligns with the theoretical framework's emphasis on understanding how discursive traditions operate through ongoing negotiation rather than fixed orthodoxy.

## 5. Data Analysis and Interpretive Framework

Field study data underwent analysis through symbolic interpretation methods that contextualize community perspectives by interpreting observational data within relevant cultural frameworks. This analytical approach involves interpreting informant statements and actions, reflecting on their significance, and organizing findings according to the conceptual framework of creative resistance within discursive tradition.

The interpretive process recognizes that ethnographic analysis involves constructing coherent narratives about cultural practices while remaining attentive to the complexity and contradictions inherent in social life. The analysis attends particularly to strategic silences, calculated ambiguities, and meaningful absences in public discourse, developing what might be termed an “ethnography of the unsaid” that captures forms of knowledge and resistance not immediately visible through conventional ethnographic methods.

The analytical framework integrates attention to both explicit discourse and observable practice while remaining sensitive to what community members strategically choose not to articulate publicly. This approach proves essential for understanding how creative resistance operates through discursive innovation and strategic reframing rather than direct confrontation with established authority structures.

### F. Structure

This dissertation examines creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition through an ethnographic analysis of the *Balimau* tradition in Kuntu village. The five chapters illuminate how communities navigate between religious authority and cultural preservation while maintaining meaningful practices that serve both spiritual and social functions. Each chapter contributes to understanding how local Islamic traditions maintain vitality through creative negotiations rather than rigid orthodoxy.

Chapter 1 provides the comprehensive introduction to this research, establishing the theoretical and empirical foundations for

understanding creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition. This chapter presents the research background that contextualizes Kuntu village within broader processes of Islamization and cultural synthesis in Indonesia. The research questions focus on how Kuntu community members negotiated the 2017 crisis, what strategies different actors employed to maintain their positions, and how local Islamic traditions maintained their vitality through negotiation rather than conformity within the *adat basandi syara', syara' basandi Kitabullah* framework. The theoretical framework integrates symbolic meaning approaches with power relations analysis, developing the concept of creative negotiation within local Islamic traditions as the central analytical tool.

Chapter 2 examines the practice of the *Balimau* ritual in its cultural and spiritual context, exploring the essence and significance of this tradition within the Kuntu community. This chapter provides detailed ethnographic analysis of how the ritual is performed, analyzing the symbols and meanings associated with *Balimau* practices. The analysis reveals how material elements like *limau* intersect with concepts of purification and renewal, demonstrating how this tradition serves as both reflection and foundation of Kuntu's cultural identity. Through examination of ritual practices, symbols, and community interpretations, this chapter establishes the cultural and spiritual ethos that shapes contemporary debates about proper practice. The ethnographic data draws from extensive fieldwork combining participant observation, and in-depth interviews to understand how *Balimau* embodies a comprehensive system of meaning within the community.

Chapter 3 analyzes the transformation and socio-historical context of *Balimau*, tracing the evolution from simple purification ritual to contested cultural tradition. This chapter explores the historical layers and social structures that shape contemporary contestations, demonstrating how arguments for and against *Balimau* draw power from deeply embedded historical narratives and established authority structures. The analysis reveals the evolution through distinct phases: the original form of simple purification and community practice, the introduction of musical innovation through *Gondang Oguang*, the

development of mixed-gender participation and entertainment elements, and the emergence of commercialization and festival atmosphere. The chapter examines how knowledge systems and educational transformations have altered interpretations of traditional practice, creating conditions for both contestation and creative adaptation. This historical foundation provides essential context for understanding the authority dynamics and negotiation strategies analyzed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 examines authority, crisis, and creative negotiation in contemporary *Balimau*, focusing on the watershed events of 2017 when religious authorities formally withdrew support from the tradition. This chapter provides detailed ethnographic analysis of how different social actors navigated this crisis, revealing the strategic negotiations through which contemporary Muslim communities balance religious authority, cultural identity, and social change. The analysis explores the creative forms of negotiation that emerged in response to official prohibition, including discursive reframing strategies that shifted legitimating frameworks from religious to cultural domains. The chapter demonstrates how youth organizers and community supporters employed strategies of vernacular intellectualism and moral argumentation to challenge authority while respecting established frameworks. Through examination of these negotiation strategies, the chapter illuminates fundamental dynamics of local Islamic tradition and reveals how arguments and conflicts over practice constitute natural and productive features that enable creative adaptation.

Chapter 5 presents the conclusion, synthesizing the main findings of this research and their theoretical implications for understanding local Islamic traditions, religious authority, and creative negotiation in contemporary Muslim societies.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In Kuntu, the *Balimau* tradition has served as a living practice for centuries, claiming to connect community members to their cultural identity, spiritual preparation for Ramadan, and collective memory of Islamic settlement in Riau. Changes observed in this ritual indicate broader transformations within Kuntu society and reveal fundamental dynamics of how local Islamic traditions accommodate innovation while maintaining essential continuity. Through ethnographic analysis employing both diachronic and synchronic approaches, this dissertation demonstrates how the 2017 controversy surrounding *Balimau* illuminates sophisticated processes of creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition.

This research reveals that tradition sustainability depends not merely on formal religious authorities but on complex negotiations involving all community members who possess social, political, or economic interests in traditional practices. The case demonstrates how negotiation emerges when formal authority conflicts with these broader community interests, generating creative adaptations that preserve essential meanings while transforming specific forms. The concept of “creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition” that emerged from this analysis provides new theoretical tools for understanding how Islamic traditions maintain vitality through productive argument rather than enforced orthodoxy.

#### A. Summary of Main Findings

My ethnographic investigation of the *Balimau* tradition in Kuntu has revealed several key findings that contribute to our understanding of how Islamic communities navigate between religious authority and cultural preservation in contemporary contexts. These findings emerged through careful analysis of the 2017 crisis, when formal religious authorities withdrew support for *Balimau*, and the creative responses that followed.

First, the ethnographic analysis revealed that creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition operates not through a single strategy but through three interconnected mechanisms that function simultaneously. This three-dimensional understanding emerged most clearly during my analysis of the 2017 youth protest, when young organizers floated a symbolic coffin down the Subayang River with banners declaring “Tradition is Dead.” This powerful act of cultural mourning exemplified how resistance in Kuntu worked through embedded positioning within power structures, political transformation of ritual meaning, and gradual non-confrontational accumulation of cultural claims.

Drawing on Lila Abu-Lughod’s diagnostic approach to power, I observed that the youth resistance remained embedded within existing Islamic frameworks rather than opposing them. The protesters never challenged religious authority directly or questioned Islamic legitimacy. Instead, they mourned tradition’s death while emphasizing social bonds and constitutional rights, positioning themselves as cultural mourners rather than religious rebels. This embedded quality proved essential to their eventual success in reviving *Balimau*. Had they positioned themselves as opposing religious authority, they would have lost the community support necessary for tradition’s continuation.

Scott’s analysis of symbolic resistance illuminated how the protest transformed the Subayang River into a political arena where competing claims about tradition, modernity, and Islamic authenticity were publicly contested. The floating coffin did not simply express grief but actively contested who possessed authority to define proper practice. Every element carried political meaning: the timing on *Balimau* day itself, the location in the river where the tradition occurred, the funeral symbolism that inverted celebration into mourning. This strategic use of ritual space demonstrated how resistance operates through spatial politics as well as through discourse, making the absence of traditional celebration as politically meaningful as presence would have been.



Bayat's concept of quiet encroachment captured how the 2017 protest formed part of a longer pattern of gradual, non-confrontational strategy. During my fieldwork from 2021 to 2024, I documented how youth organizers continued preparations for *Balimau* even when official support was withdrawn. They maintained networks of community support through informal conversations, sustained relationships with government officials, and kept *Balimau* visible through social media. Each action appeared modest, yet collectively they shifted the terrain of debate from "Is this Islamic?" to "Is this our tradition?" This persistence eventually bore fruit when *Balimau* resumed in subsequent years with modified forms that addressed some religious concerns while preserving core community functions.

Second, the research demonstrates that Islamic traditions operate through productive tension rather than rigid orthodoxy. The controversy surrounding *Balimau* revealed how arguments and conflicts over the form and significance of practices constitute natural and productive features of Islamic tradition rather than signs of weakness or deviation. As Talal Asad observes, "argument and conflict over the form and significance of practices are therefore a natural part of any Islamic tradition. The *Balimau* case confirms this insight while extending our understanding of how such arguments generate creative possibilities for cultural adaptation.

The analysis of *Balimau* as a rite of passage revealed important insights about the evolution of social solidarity within the community. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's framework, I observed how the ritual's tripartite structure of separation, liminality, and incorporation has historically served to reinforce community bonds, but in ways that have transformed across generations. Historically, *Balimau* functioned to strengthen solidarity within the Kuntu community as a unified Muslim collective preparing spiritually for Ramadan. The shared ritual experience created what Émile Durkheim identified as the emotional intensity that binds individuals into a moral community. However, the 2017 crisis revealed a fundamental transformation in how this social solidarity operates. Rather than encompassing the entire Muslim

community as in the past, the ritual now primarily serves to strengthen bonds among younger community members who see themselves as guardians of cultural heritage.

This transformation in *Balimau*'s social function reflects broader shifts in how Islamic identity and cultural heritage are negotiated in contemporary Indonesia. The youth who organized the 2017 protest and subsequent revivals positioned themselves as defenders of cultural practice. Their strategies drew upon everyday language and practical reasoning to articulate how Islamic principles could accommodate local tradition. This approach enabled broader community participation in debates about proper practice, democratizing discussion without challenging scholarly authority.

Third, the study reveals creative forms of negotiation that operate within rather than against established authority structures. The youth response to the 2017 crisis demonstrated what Mona Lilja terms "constructive resistance," which "transcends the whole phenomenon of being against something; instead it constructs 'alternative' or 'prefigurative' social institutions or discourses." Unlike conventional forms of resistance that simply oppose authority, the Kuntu youth created new legitimating frameworks that preserved cultural practice while respecting Islamic discourse. This form of negotiation generated new possibilities for discourse rather than simply inverting existing power relations.

Fourth, the research illuminates how strategic reframing can enable communities to preserve cultural practices by shifting between different fields of legitimacy. Using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "field" (*champ*), I analyzed how youth organizers successfully moved the *Balimau* debate from the religious field, where they lacked authority, to the cultural field, where they possessed greater advantages. By repositioning *Balimau* as intangible cultural heritage rather than religious practice, organizers accessed alternative frameworks for legitimation through appeals to cultural diversity, regional autonomy, and constitutional protections that operate independently of religious justification.

Fifth, the study reveals patterns of selective criticism that illuminate how different forms of authority operate in contemporary Muslim societies. Religious scholars, traditional leaders, and government officials each employed calculated strategies that acknowledged competing pressures while maintaining their institutional roles. I observed what I term “educated silence” among religious scholars who possessed textual knowledge that could undermine *Balimau*’s legitimacy but chose to prioritize community welfare over scholarly precision. Traditional leaders demonstrated “calculated neutrality” that respected religious authority while preserving space for cultural negotiation. Government officials employed “pragmatic support” that formally complied with religious decisions while enabling practical flexibility.

Sixth, the analysis documents how hidden transcripts emerged in both traditional gathering places and digital spaces to develop alternative narratives about tradition, authenticity, and religious authority. James Scott’s concept of “hidden transcripts” proved valuable for understanding how resistance discourse developed in coffee shops, tea stalls, and informal evening gatherings throughout Kuntu. These spaces provided security for expressing sharp political analysis through humor, metaphor, and indirect critique that would be impossible in more formal settings.

## **B. Theoretical Contributions**

This research makes several significant theoretical contributions to our understanding of Islamic discursive traditions, resistance studies, and the anthropology of religion. These contributions emerge from the intersection of ethnographic observation with theoretical frameworks that have not previously been applied to understanding how contemporary Muslim communities navigate between religious authority and claim of cultural preservation.

### **1. Creative Negotiation within Local Islamic Tradition**

The central theoretical contribution of this research is the development of “creative negotiation within local Islamic

tradition” as an analytical framework for understanding how Muslim communities employ strategies that respect established boundaries while generating new possibilities for practice. This concept builds upon but extends existing frameworks in resistance studies by examining how Islamic communities operate specifically through the argumentative structure of Islamic discourse.

Unlike James Scott’s “everyday forms of resistance,” which emphasize covert tactics such as “foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance,” or Mona Lilja’s “constructive resistance,” which constructs alternative institutions alongside existing ones, creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition works within rather than against established frameworks. The Kuntu case demonstrates how community members employed Islamic discourse itself rather than avoiding or opposing it, repositioning practices within alternative legitimating categories that remained recognizably Islamic.

This form of negotiation operates through three key mechanisms that distinguish it from other resistance frameworks. First, strategic reframing employs Islamic discourse itself rather than avoiding or constructing alternatives to it. When Kuntu youth repositioned *Balimau* as cultural identity rather than religious obligation, they did not reject Islamic authority but rather deployed alternative categories within Islamic thought to create autonomous space for cultural practice. Second, discursive innovation develops new ways of talking about, framing, and justifying traditional practices that maintain respect for established authority while creating possibilities for continued practice. Third, productive synthesis generates creative adaptation that preserves essential meanings while transforming specific forms.

The integration of these three mechanisms represents a theoretical advance beyond existing resistance frameworks. Unlike James Scott’s everyday resistance, which operates through

covert tactics and hidden transcripts, or Mona Lilja's constructive resistance, which constructs alternative institutions alongside existing ones, creative resistance within discursive tradition works through the specific constraints and possibilities of Islamic discourse itself. This specificity matters because Islamic traditions, as Talal Asad demonstrates, maintain coherence through ongoing arguments about proper practice rather than through fixed orthodoxy.

The Kuntu case reveals how these three mechanisms operate simultaneously rather than sequentially. The 2017 youth protest exemplifies all three dimensions at once. It remained embedded within Islamic discourse through deferential language and cultural rather than religious framing, respecting Abu-Lughod's insight that resistance operates through rather than outside power structures. It transformed the river space into a political arena through symbolic inversion and spatial politics, demonstrating Scott's analysis of how subordinate groups contest meaning through ritual performance. It represented episodic visible action within a longer pattern of quiet persistent cultural assertion, exemplifying Bayat's concept of quiet encroachment through gradual accumulation of small gains.

I observed how different actors in Kuntu deployed these mechanisms through various strategies. Religious authorities emphasized *Balimau's* potential for religious error. Youth organizers emphasized its role in community bonding and cultural identity. Traditional leaders emphasized its historical continuity. Government officials emphasized its contribution to youth and village development. Each interpretive framework represented a bid for authority to define the tradition's proper form, revealing what Scott terms the political struggle over meaning. Yet all parties positioned themselves as upholding the principle *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*, demonstrating how creative negotiation operates within rather than against Islamic tradition.

This finding challenges binary frameworks that position Islamic orthodoxy against local tradition or religious authority against cultural negotiation. The careful strategies employed by all parties reveal how Islamic traditions operate through integration of diverse voices rather than unified orthodoxy. Multiple legitimate interpretations operate simultaneously within the same discursive framework, with religious authorities creating interpretive space through strategic incompleteness while cultural agents exploit this space through discursive innovation.

The theoretical significance extends beyond the immediate Kuntu case to broader questions about how Islamic traditions function in contemporary contexts. My ethnographic findings demonstrate that arguments and conflicts over the form and significance of practices constitute the normal mechanism through which Islamic traditions maintain coherence while adapting to changing circumstances. The productive tension between competing interpretations sustains tradition's vitality rather than threatening it. Creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition represents not deviation from proper Islamic practice but rather one of the central mechanisms through which Islamic traditions actually operate in practice.

The multiplicity of negotiation strategies pursued by diverse actors with different capabilities and connections constitutes a form of collective strength. Youth organizers leveraged their educational backgrounds and familiarity with governmental discourse. Traditional leaders drew on their social capital and mediating authority. Government officials provided administrative flexibility within bureaucratic constraints. Ordinary community members maintained practices through everyday persistence. This distribution of work and risks across the community created multiple pathways for advancing cultural claims, ensuring that no single failure could eliminate the tradition entirely.



Understanding this collective, embedded, political, and gradual nature of creative negotiation requires synthesizing insights from multiple theoretical traditions while specifying how they operate within Islamic discursive frameworks. Abu-Lughod helps us recognize resistance as embedded within power relations, Scott illuminates how ritual spaces become political arenas, Bayat captures the power of gradual accumulation, and Asad provides the foundational understanding of how Islamic traditions maintain coherence through productive argument. Together, these frameworks reveal that Muslim communities maintain agency not through rejecting Islamic authority but through deploying it strategically to generate new possibilities for practice.

## **2. Extending Van Gennep's Rites of Passage Theory**

This research extends Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage by demonstrating how ritual functions can evolve while maintaining structural continuity. The *Balimau* case reveals that the same tripartite structure of separation, liminality, and incorporation can serve different solidarity functions across historical periods. Historically, the ritual strengthened bonds within the entire Muslim community as a unified collective. Following the 2017 crisis, it now primarily serves to strengthen bonds among younger community members who position themselves as cultural heritage guardians.

This finding contributes to anthropological understanding of how rites of passage adapt to changing social conditions while maintaining their essential structural properties. It suggests that van Gennep's framework requires development to account for how ritual functions can transform in response to generational change, educational transformation, and shifting patterns of religious authority. The concept of "evolving solidarity functions" provides analytical tools for understanding how rituals maintain relevance across changing social contexts.

### 3. Developing Bourdieu's Field Theory for Religious Contexts

The research demonstrates how Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social fields operates in contemporary Indonesian religious contexts, revealing how strategic actors can navigate between different fields to access alternative sources of legitimacy. The successful reframing of *Balimau* from religious to cultural domain illustrates how field-shifting can enable resistance that bypasses rather than directly confronts established authority.

This contribution extends field theory by examining how religious and cultural fields intersect in contemporary Muslim societies. The analysis reveals that these fields operate according to different rules and forms of capital, creating opportunities for strategic maneuvering by actors who possess competence in multiple domains. Youth organizers leveraged their educational backgrounds and familiarity with governmental discourse to reframe the contest in terms favorable to their objectives, demonstrating how cultural capital can be deployed across different fields.

### 4. Advancing Understanding of Islamic Traditions

Building on Talal Asad's foundational work on Islamic discursive tradition, this research reveals how ordinary Muslims participate in shaping the arguments through which Islamic traditions maintain coherence. While Asad's framework tends to focus on religious authority and scholarly discourse, the *Balimau* case demonstrates how entire communities deploy strategies of negotiation within local Islamic frameworks.

The concept of creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition addresses how Islamic communities navigate between textual authorities and practical necessities while maintaining respectful engagement with established frameworks. This approach recognizes that Islamic traditions maintain vitality through productive tension and creative adaptation rather than

rigid orthodoxy, offering important insights for understanding how contemporary Islamic societies balance continuity and change while preserving meaningful connections to Islamic history and identity.

### **C. Implications for Understanding Contemporary Islam**

The findings of this research illuminate fundamental questions about how Islamic traditions operate in pluralistic contemporary contexts where multiple forms of religious authority compete for legitimacy. The Kuntu case demonstrates dynamics that extend far beyond a single village's ritual practices to reveal how Muslim communities globally navigate between religious orthodoxy and cultural expression, between textual authority and lived practice, between scholarly interpretation and vernacular reasoning.

Three interconnected implications emerge from this analysis, each addressing persistent debates within anthropological and Islamic studies scholarship. First, the research reveals that religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies operates through negotiation rather than unilateral imposition. Second, it illuminates how Muslim communities maintain agency within structures of religious authority through creative engagement rather than direct opposition. Third, it demonstrates how traditional practices maintain relevance through adaptive transformation rather than unchanged preservation. These implications challenge conventional scholarly approaches while opening new directions for understanding Islamic traditions in contemporary contexts.

Moreover, the findings of this research have implications that extend beyond the immediate context of Kuntu to broader questions about religious authority, cultural change, and creative agency in Muslim societies globally. The *Balimau* case demonstrates several important dynamics that characterize how Islamic traditions operate in contemporary pluralistic contexts.

First, the research reveals that religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies operates through negotiation rather than imposition. The calculated ambiguity of religious pronouncements, the strategic

selectivity of criticism, and the preservation of space for community adaptation all demonstrate forms of religious governance that prioritize social harmony alongside theological consistency. The finding challenges scholarly approaches that assume religious authority operates through rigid enforcement of textual orthodoxy.

Second, the study illuminates how Muslim communities maintain agency within structures of religious authority through creative engagement rather than direct opposition. The strategies employed by Kuntu youth demonstrate forms of religious subjectivity that neither simply comply with nor reject established authority but actively participate in shaping the terms through which Islamic practice evolves. This finding contributes to anthropological understanding of religious agency in contemporary Muslim societies.

Third, the research demonstrates how traditional practices maintain relevance through adaptive transformation rather than unchanged preservation. The *Balimau* tradition that emerged from the 2017 crisis bears the marks of both religious criticism and community resistance, representing creative adaptation that preserved essential meanings while transforming specific forms. This finding challenges approaches to tradition that emphasize either conservation or abandonment, revealing instead how traditions maintain vitality through productive engagement with changing circumstances.

Fourth, the analysis reveals how contemporary Muslim communities navigate between global Islamic discourse and local cultural expression through forms of reasoning that respect both universal principles and contextual wisdom. The principle “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*” operates not as a rigid formula but as a dynamic framework that enables creative interpretation and adaptation. This finding contributes to understanding how Islamic societies maintain coherence across diverse cultural contexts.

#### **D. Limitations and Future Research Directions**

While this research provides valuable insights into how Islamic communities navigate between religious authority and cultural

preservation, several limitations suggest directions for future investigation. First, the study focuses on a single case within a specific Indonesian context, limiting the generalizability of findings to other Muslim societies with different historical trajectories, legal frameworks, and authority structures. Comparative research examining how similar dynamics operate in other Indonesian regions or other Muslim-majority countries would strengthen understanding of the patterns identified in this study.

Second, the research concentrates primarily on the 2017 crisis and its immediate aftermath, providing limited insight into longer-term patterns of adaptation and negotiation. Longitudinal research tracking how the *Balimau* tradition continues to evolve over the coming decades would contribute valuable understanding about the durability and transformation of creative negotiation strategies.

Third, while the study examines multiple perspectives within the Kuntu community, it provides limited analysis of how external actors including regional government officials, national Islamic organizations, and transnational Islamic movements influence local negotiations around traditional practices. Research examining how local communities interact with broader networks of religious authority and cultural influence would enhance understanding of the multi-scalar dynamics that shape contemporary Islamic practice.

Fourth, the research focuses primarily on explicit forms of, providing less attention to subtle processes of internalization, habitual practice, and embodied tradition that may operate below the threshold of conscious reflection. Future research employing different methodological approaches, including longer-term participant observation and phenomenological investigation, could contribute important insights about the lived experience of navigating between religious authority and cultural identity.

Several specific research directions emerge from these limitations. Comparative studies examining how different Indonesian communities navigate similar tensions between Islamic orthodoxy and local tradition would reveal whether the patterns identified in Kuntu

operate more broadly or reflect specific local circumstances. Cross-national research comparing Indonesian dynamics with similar processes in other Muslim societies would contribute to understanding about how different political and legal contexts shape possibilities for creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition.

Investigation of how digital technologies and social media platforms create new spaces for developing and circulating alternative narratives about Islamic practice would extend understanding of how hidden transcripts operate in contemporary contexts. Research examining how generational differences in religious education, cultural exposure, and economic opportunity shape approaches to tradition and authority would contribute insights about the sustainability of creative negotiation strategies over time.

Analysis of how women participate in negotiations around traditional practices would address an important gap in this research, which focused primarily on male-dominated public spaces and formal authority structures. Research examining how different forms of traditional practice including life-cycle rituals, agricultural ceremonies, and healing traditions navigate contemporary Islamic discourse would reveal whether the dynamics identified in the *Balimau* case apply more broadly.

The theoretical framework of creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition that emerged from the Kuntu case suggests several productive directions for future research. Comparative studies examining how the three mechanisms (embedded resistance, political transformation of meaning, and quiet encroachment) operate in different Islamic contexts could refine our understanding of which dynamics are specific to particular social configurations and which represent broader patterns in Muslim societies. Research examining how digital media transforms the spaces and strategies of creative resistance would address increasingly important questions about how Islamic traditions adapt to technological change.

Additionally, the gendered dimensions of creative negotiation within local Islamic tradition deserve more sustained attention than



this dissertation could provide. While I documented women's contributions to *Balimau*'s evolution, future research might examine how gender shapes access to different resistance mechanisms and how women's strategies of cultural preservation differ from or complement those employed by men. Such research could reveal whether the three-dimensional framework I developed applies equally across gender lines or whether women's resistance operates through additional or alternative mechanisms.

Finally, longitudinal research following *Balimau* and similar traditions over extended periods would illuminate how creative negotiation strategies evolve as communities experience generational change, educational transformation, and shifting patterns of religious authority. Such research might reveal whether the current pattern of embedded, political, and gradual resistance represents a stable equilibrium or a transitional phase in ongoing negotiations between Islamic orthodoxy and cultural practice.

### **E. Reflections**

As I complete this analysis, *Balimau* has returned to Kuntu's rivers. The tradition I observe today carries clear traces of transformation while remaining fundamentally recognizable to those who have practiced it for generations. Despite ongoing contests over its proper form, the ritual continues to draw participants year after year, creating moments of collective preparation for Ramadan that strengthen community bonds while respecting religious boundaries.

The persistence of *Balimau* through periods of crisis and change reveals the creative resilience that characterizes Islamic traditions and the communities that sustain them. This resilience operates not through rigid preservation of inherited forms but through adaptive engagement with changing circumstances that maintains essential meanings while transforming specific practices. The capacity for creative adaptation within established frameworks represents a form of cultural wisdom that enables communities to navigate between competing pressures while preserving what they value most.

The 2017 crisis that initially appeared to threaten *Balimau's* survival ultimately generated new possibilities for practice that satisfied both religious concerns and cultural aspirations. The creative negotiation strategies developed by community members demonstrate forms of agency that neither simply comply with nor reject established authority but actively participate in shaping the terms through which tradition evolves. These strategies offer insights about how communities can maintain meaningful cultural practices within changing religious and political contexts.

This research reveals that arguments and conflicts over the form and significance of practices, rather than threatening traditional continuity, actually constitute the mechanisms through which Islamic traditions maintain vitality across changing historical circumstances. The productive tensions between religious authority and cultural expression, between textual interpretation and lived practice, between universal principles and local wisdom, generate the creative possibilities that enable Islamic communities to navigate between continuity and change while preserving meaningful connections to their identity, their history, and their faith.

As anthropologists and scholars of religion continue to examine how contemporary Muslim societies negotiate between tradition and modernity, between local culture and global Islam, between religious authority and democratic participation, the *Balimau* case offers important insights about the strategies through which communities maintain agency within structures of authority. Understanding these strategies requires attention not only to formal institutions and official discourse but also to the creative adaptations that emerge from the daily negotiations through which ordinary Muslims participate in shaping the traditions that define their communities.

The tradition bears the marks of its passage through crisis yet persists as a meaningful practice that connects community members to their identity, their history, and their faith. This persistence through transformation epitomizes the creative resilience of Islamic discursive traditions and the communities that maintain them. In Kuntu, the river

continues to flow, and the people continue to gather at its banks, carrying forward a tradition that has learned to survive through its capacity to change.





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**Lecturer**

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**Awards**

1. The third-place winner of the Mayor of Pekanbaru Cup in the high school-level Poster Making Competition in Pekanbaru. (2006)
2. The winner of the Arabic Language Debate Competition in Riau. (2008)
3. Awarded as the Pioneer of the School Tabloid by the Syekh Burhanuddin Foundation, Pekanbaru, Riau. (2009)
4. Recipient of the Best Graduate Award from Al-Munawwarah Islamic Boarding School, Pekanbaru (2009).
5. Awardee of the UIN Sunan Kalijaga Outstanding Student Scholarship (2011–2012).
6. Graduated with Cum Laude honors from UIN Sunan Kalijaga. (2014)
7. Recipient of the Thesis Scholarship from the Center for Qur'anic Studies (PSQ), Jakarta (2016).
8. Awardee of the LPDP doctoral program scholarship (2019–2024).
9. Recipient of the Sandwich Program jointly organized by the Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences, and the Graduate School of UIN Sunan Kalijaga (2025)

## Publications and Presentations

### 2013

- Nikah Sirri dalam Perspektif Hadis  
*Musawa: Jurnal Studi Gender dan Islam* Vol 12, No 1, PSW UIN Sunan Kalijaga
- Nilai-nilai Ideologis Kisah Ashāb al-Kahf dalam Q.S. al-Kahf (Aplikasi Semiotika Roland Barthes)  
*Bachelor Thesis, Faculty of Ushuluddin and Islamic Thought, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta*

### 2014

- Al-Qur'an dan Hadis Tentang Problematika Umat in Taufik Umar (ed.), *Al-Qur'an dan Isu-Isu Aktual*  
*Published by Idea Press Yogyakarta*

### 2016

- Praktek Living Hadis dalam Tradisi Mandi Balimau  
*Presented at National Workshop by Jurnal Living Hadis*
- The Character Education in the Hadith of Permissibility to Discipline Children (Application of Contextual Hadith Interpretation)  
*Presented at the 1st ASILHA International Conference*
- Tradisi Mandi Balimau di Masyarakat Kuntu: Living Hadis sebagai Bukti Sejarah  
*Published by Jurnal Living Hadis, Vol 1 No 2, Oct 2016*
- The Critical Study of the Basic Values of Struggle (NDP) HMI as an Interpretation of the Qur'an  
*Presented at National Seminar held by the Asosiasi Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir se-Indonesia (AIAT)*

### 2017

- Gender Equality in Tabari's Interpretation of al-Nisa (4):1  
*Presented at International Seminar on Gender Studies held by UIN Imam Bonjol Padang*
- Korelasi Penafsiran al-Ṭabarī dan Aminah Wadūd: Analisis Kesetaraan Gender dalam Q.S. al-Nisā' (4):1  
*Master's Thesis, the School of Graduate Studies, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta*

**2018**

- Gender Equality in Traditional Quranic Commentary of the Creation of Women  
*Presented at Ushuluddin International Conference (USICON) 2*
- Sabar dalam Perspektif Islam dan Barat  
*Published by AL-MURABBI: Jurnal Studi Kependidikan dan Keislaman 4 (2), 233–245*

**2019**

- Endanger Local Religion: Talang Mamak Belief, Da'wa, and Modern Capitalism  
*Presented at International Conference on Salafism, Citizenship, and Minority Affairs | Jointly held by Radboud University Nijmegen & Erasmus & Graduate School of State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta*

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- Perspektif Kesetaraan dan Keadilan Gender Husein Muhammad dalam Silang Pendapat Khitan Perempuan  
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*Published by Wahana Islamika: Jurnal Studi Keislaman 8 (1), 86–109*

**2024**

- KOMPARASI STUDI HISTORIS-KRITIS AL-QUR'AN ORIENTALIS (Studi Pemikiran Abraham Geiger, Theodor Nöldeke dan Angelica Neuwirth)  
*Published by Hamalatul Qur'an Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Alqur'an*

**2025**

- Examining Hadith through Living Hadith Studies: The Case of the *Balimau* Tradition in Kuntu Society, Sumatra, Indonesia  
*Presented as a Regional Guest Lecture at the Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA), Austrian Academy of Sciences*

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