

# Ethnographic Mapping of Betadut-Mediated Circulation, Reproduction, And Contextual Reinterpretation of Islamic Texts Among Besemah And Serawai Communities

Dr. Xiaomei Zhang

Faculty of Comparative Philology and Translation Studies, Shanghai Institute of Literary Sciences, Shanghai, China

**Received:** 08 May 2026; **Accepted:** 05 June 2026; **Published:** 01 July 2026

**Abstract:** This study examines the ethnographic dynamics of Islamic textual circulation, reproduction, and contextual reinterpretation mediated through Betadut performance traditions among the Besemah and Serawai communities in South Sumatra, Indonesia. By integrating discourse analysis, semiotic theory, and folklore studies, the research explores how Islamic texts are not merely transmitted as static doctrinal entities but are actively reconfigured within oral-performance systems embedded in local cultural practices. Drawing upon Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough, 2004), Saussurean linguistic theory (de Saussure, 1988), and semiotic interpretations of meaning-making (Danesi, 2004; Merrell, 1997), the study identifies Betadut as a cultural mechanism that facilitates both preservation and transformation of Islamic knowledge.

Findings indicate that Islamic textuality within Besemah and Serawai societies is deeply entangled with oral traditions such as Tadut, Rejung, and related performative genres. These forms act as mediating structures that reinterpret religious narratives in localized socio-cultural idioms. The study further demonstrates that the Islamization process in Bengkulu and surrounding regions, as documented by Ismail (2019), significantly shaped the adaptive integration of Islamic texts into indigenous expressive systems. The research concludes that Betadut functions as both a mnemonic and ideological apparatus, enabling continuous negotiation between orthodoxy and local epistemologies.

**Keywords:** Betadut, Islamic Text Circulation, Ethnographic Mapping, Besemah, Serawai, Discourse Analysis, Semiotics, Oral Tradition, Cultural Reinterpretation, Islamization of Sumatra.

**1. Introduction:** The circulation of Islamic texts across Southeast Asian societies has historically been shaped not only by formal scholarly transmission but also by localized cultural mechanisms that mediate interpretation and meaning-making. In the context of South Sumatra, particularly among the Besemah and Serawai ethnic groups, Betadut emerges as a significant oral-performance tradition that facilitates the reproduction and redistribution of Islamic knowledge in non-textual yet deeply interpretive forms.

Islamic expansion in Bengkulu and its surrounding

regions was not merely a doctrinal diffusion but a complex socio-cultural transformation process involving adaptation, negotiation, and reinterpretation of religious knowledge. As documented by Ismail (2019), Islam's development in the region from the 15th to the 20th century was characterized by syncretic engagements with local belief systems and communicative traditions. This historical trajectory provides an essential backdrop for understanding how Islamic texts are embedded within oral traditions such as Betadut.

The central problem addressed in this study is the limited scholarly attention given to the role of performative oral traditions in mediating Islamic textual circulation. While existing studies have examined Tadut and Rejung as folkloric expressions (Sady, 2017; Susanti, 2008), there remains a significant gap in understanding how these forms function as epistemic systems for religious reinterpretation.

This research aims to: (1) map the ethnographic pathways of Islamic text circulation through Betadut, (2) analyze the semiotic and discursive mechanisms underlying its performance, and (3) examine its role in reshaping religious meaning within Besemah and Serawai societies. The study is significant because it contributes to broader debates on oral tradition, discourse transformation, and cultural Islamization processes in Southeast Asia.

Theoretically, the study draws upon Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough, 2004), semiotics (de Saussure, 1988; Danesi, 2004), and folklore theory (Dundes, 2007; Propp, 1997). These frameworks collectively enable a multidimensional interpretation of Betadut as a discursive and symbolic system.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Folklore and Oral Tradition as Knowledge Systems

Folklore studies have long recognized oral traditions as structured systems of meaning rather than informal cultural artifacts. Dundes (2007) emphasizes that folklore constitutes a cognitive framework through which communities encode and transmit collective values. Similarly, Propp (1997) highlights the structural consistency of oral narratives, suggesting that even variable performances adhere to underlying functional patterns.

In the context of Besemah and Serawai societies, oral forms such as Tadut and Betadut operate as repositories of communal knowledge. Studies by Susanti (2008) and Herdalena (2002) indicate that these traditions are not merely artistic expressions but also vehicles for moral and religious instruction. However, these works do not fully address how Islamic textual content is embedded within such oral systems.

### 2.2 Semiotics and Meaning Construction

Semiotic theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how meaning is constructed and transmitted. Saussure's structural linguistics (de Saussure, 1988) introduces the distinction between signifier and signified, which is crucial in analyzing how Islamic concepts are transformed into performative symbols within Betadut.

Danesi (2004) expands this perspective by emphasizing the cultural embeddedness of signs, arguing that

meaning is always contextually negotiated. Merrell (1997) further contributes by highlighting the interpretive flexibility of signs in dynamic communicative environments. These frameworks collectively suggest that Betadut functions as a semiotic system where Islamic teachings are recontextualized into culturally intelligible forms.

### 2.3 Discourse, Power, and Cultural Mediation

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (1995; 2004) provides a powerful tool for examining how language and power interact in shaping social reality. In the context of Betadut, discourse is not neutral but embedded within cultural hierarchies and interpretive traditions.

Fox (1971; 1974) similarly demonstrates how ritual language structures reinforce cultural identity through parallelism and repetition. These insights are relevant to understanding how Betadut performances encode Islamic values while simultaneously localizing them within Besemah and Serawai communicative frameworks.

### 2.4 Islamization and Local Adaptation

The historical Islamization of Bengkulu provides an essential contextual foundation for this study. Ismail (2019) documents the gradual integration of Islamic teachings into local socio-cultural systems from the 15th century onward. This process was not linear but involved continuous adaptation to indigenous linguistic and symbolic systems.

Further studies by Karim (2013) and Sanusi (2018) highlight how Islamic jurisprudential and theological interpretations were localized in Indonesian contexts. These works support the argument that Islamic textuality in the region cannot be separated from its cultural mediation processes.

### 2.5 Research Gap

Despite extensive literature on folklore, semiotics, and Islamization, there is a notable lack of integrated ethnographic studies focusing specifically on Betadut as a mediating structure for Islamic text circulation. Existing research tends to treat oral traditions and Islamic textuality separately, thereby overlooking their dynamic interaction. This study addresses this gap by proposing an ethnographic mapping of Betadut as a hybrid discourse system.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic research design combined with discourse-analytical interpretation. The primary objective is to investigate how Islamic texts are circulated and reinterpreted

through Betadut performance traditions among Besemah and Serawai communities.

### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in three integrated theoretical perspectives:

1. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; 2004)

Used to examine power relations and ideological structures embedded in Betadut performances.

2. Semiotic Theory (de Saussure, 1988; Danesi, 2004; Merrell, 1997)

Applied to analyze symbolic transformations of Islamic meanings.

3. Folklore Structuralism (Dundes, 2007; Propp, 1997)

Used to identify narrative patterns and cultural functions of oral traditions.

### 3.3 Data Context and Ethnographic Scope

The ethnographic scope focuses on Besemah and Serawai communities in South Sumatra, where Betadut performances are traditionally practiced in both ritual and social contexts. These performances are often linked with Islamic moral storytelling, communal gatherings, and cultural ceremonies.

The historical context of Islamization in this region, as noted by Ismail (2019), is critical in understanding how Islamic narratives were absorbed into oral traditions.

### 3.4 Data Collection Approach

The study relies on secondary ethnographic literature, documented oral tradition studies, and linguistic analyses of Betadut-related performances as reported in prior scholarly works (Herdalena, 2002; Sady, 2017; Susanti, 2008). These sources are systematically analyzed to reconstruct patterns of textual circulation.

### 3.5 Analytical Procedure

The analytical process involves three stages:

1. Textual Mapping

Identification of Islamic thematic elements within Betadut narratives.

2. Semiotic Deconstruction

Analysis of signs, symbols, and metaphors used in performances.

3. Discourse Interpretation

Examination of ideological and cultural meanings using Fairclough's three-dimensional model.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Betadut as a Cultural Transmission System

The analysis indicates that Betadut functions as a

structured cultural transmission system through which Islamic ideas are circulated, reproduced, and recontextualized within Besemah and Serawai societies. Rather than operating as a passive oral performance, Betadut actively reshapes textual meaning by embedding Islamic narratives into locally meaningful symbolic structures. This aligns with Ismail (2019), who emphasizes that Islamization in Bengkulu evolved through adaptive cultural integration rather than direct textual transplantation.

The findings show that Islamic stories, moral injunctions, and theological concepts are not transmitted in their canonical Arabic textual form. Instead, they are re-expressed through metaphorical language, rhythmic speech patterns, and performative storytelling conventions typical of Betadut. This transformation enables wider accessibility among non-literate or semi-literate audiences, reinforcing oral epistemology as a legitimate knowledge system.

### 4.2 Circulation Pathways of Islamic Texts

The circulation of Islamic textual content within Betadut follows a non-linear ethnographic pathway. The study identifies three primary stages:

1. Textual Absorption Stage

Islamic narratives are absorbed from religious teaching, oral preaching, or localized Islamic learning environments.

2. Oral Transformation Stage

These narratives are restructured into performative units characterized by rhythm, repetition, and symbolic phrasing.

3. Community Redistribution Stage

Reinterpreted narratives are disseminated through Betadut performances in communal gatherings, rituals, and cultural events.

This cyclical pattern demonstrates that textual circulation is not fixed but continuously re-encoded within cultural performance systems.

### 4.3 Semiotic Reinterpretation of Islamic Meaning

The findings further reveal that Betadut operates as a semiotic transformation mechanism. Islamic concepts such as morality, divine authority, and spiritual accountability are translated into local symbolic registers.

Drawing on Saussurean semiotics (de Saussure, 1988), the signifier (oral performance) and signified (Islamic meaning) are dynamically reconfigured. Danesi (2004) supports this interpretation by emphasizing that cultural meaning is always context-dependent.

For example, moral teachings about obedience to God

are often represented through metaphorical references to ancestral wisdom or communal harmony rather than direct theological articulation. This demonstrates a localized epistemological adaptation of Islamic knowledge.

#### 4.4 Role of Betadut in Identity Construction

The data also indicate that Betadut contributes significantly to identity construction among Besemah and Serawai communities. It serves as a cultural marker distinguishing local Islamic expression from standardized religious discourse.

Through repetitive performance cycles, Betadut reinforces collective identity by linking Islamic values with indigenous cultural heritage. This dual structure supports both religious affiliation and ethnic-cultural continuity.

#### 4.5 Structural Features of Betadut Performance

The structural analysis reveals three dominant features:

- Parallelism and repetition, which enhance memorability and oral transmission (Fox, 1971)
- Dialogic narration, which allows interactive engagement between performer and audience
- Symbolic condensation, where complex Islamic ideas are compressed into metaphorical expressions

These features collectively enhance the sustainability of Islamic knowledge within oral-cultural environments.

### 5. DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 Theoretical Implications of Betadut as Discourse System

The findings strongly support the interpretation of Betadut as a hybrid discourse system where religious texts undergo cultural re-articulation. Applying Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (1995; 2004), Betadut can be understood as a site of discursive production where ideology, language, and cultural identity intersect.

Islamic textual authority is not diminished but redistributed through localized interpretive practices. This challenges conventional assumptions that written religious texts maintain fixed semantic boundaries.

#### 5.2 Cultural Mediation and Semiotic Transformation

The semiotic transformation observed in Betadut aligns with Merrell's (1997) concept of interpretive flexibility in sign systems. Islamic meanings are not lost but re-encoded into culturally resonant symbols.

This transformation highlights a critical tension between textual orthodoxy and oral adaptation. While formal Islamic doctrine emphasizes textual fidelity,

Betadut prioritizes communicative relevance and cultural intelligibility.

#### 5.3 Islamization and Local Knowledge Integration

Consistent with Ismail (2019), the Islamization process in Bengkulu is characterized by gradual cultural assimilation rather than doctrinal replacement. Betadut emerges as a key mechanism in this process, functioning as both a pedagogical and mnemonic tool.

However, this integration also introduces interpretive variability, which may lead to divergent understandings of Islamic teachings across different communities.

#### 5.4 Contradictions and Tensions

A notable contradiction arises between standardized Islamic education and localized oral interpretations. While formal religious institutions prioritize textual accuracy, Betadut privileges narrative flexibility.

This tension raises questions about authority, authenticity, and interpretive legitimacy within Islamic knowledge systems. Nevertheless, such plurality also reflects the adaptive resilience of Islamic traditions in multicultural contexts.

#### 5.5 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary ethnographic and textual sources rather than direct fieldwork-based participant observation. As a result, certain performance nuances and contextual variations of Betadut may not be fully captured.

Additionally, the interpretive framework is primarily theoretical, which may limit empirical generalizability.

### 6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Betadut functions as a complex ethnographic mechanism for the circulation, reproduction, and reinterpretation of Islamic texts among Besemah and Serawai communities. It operates at the intersection of oral tradition, semiotic transformation, and cultural Islamization.

The research confirms that Islamic textuality in this context is not static but dynamically reconstructed through performative discourse systems. As supported by Ismail (2019), Islam in Bengkulu evolved through continuous cultural negotiation, with Betadut serving as a critical medium of adaptation.

The study contributes to broader theoretical discussions on discourse, folklore, and religious semiotics by demonstrating how oral traditions can function as legitimate epistemic infrastructures. Future research should incorporate ethnographic fieldwork, audio-visual performance analysis, and comparative studies across Southeast Asian oral traditions to deepen understanding of cultural-religious textual transformation.

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