Atjeh — a Sultanate

The great mosque of the capital, Banda Atjeh.

That mythical corpus of knowledge that 'every schoolboy knows' is forever expanding. In South-East Asia, at least, our schoolboy might optimistically be expected to know two things about Atjeh: that the first Muslim states of South-East Asia arose on its territory in the late thirteenth century; and that it became the great and terrible foe of the Portuguese in Malacca two and a half centuries later.

The schoolboys can be forgiven their ignorance of what became of Atjeh after the heroic centuries. It is in the nature of states to rise and fall, especially in the maritime Malay world which has always been so dependent on trade. Today Atjeh, a province without major cities, is regarded by many Indonesians as the archetype of a provincial backwater. Its talented people are still of much significance, however, and may be expected to play a considerable role on the national stage.

The Sultanate of Atjeh was in the centre of the Asian political scene for a century and a half, from about 1520 to 1650. Before then, the north-west corner of Sumatra was a tangle of rival petty states, much as it had been when Marco Polo visited the area in 1292. Its unification under the first known Sultan of Atjeh was part of the Muslim counter-attack against the Portuguese, who were expelled in the 1520's from the bases they had established in some of the pepper-producing states of North Sumatra. Indeed, just as the Portuguese onslaught in Asia is often explained as a continuation of the Crusade against the Moors in their own country, so might Atjehnese aversion to foreign (especially non-Muslim) rule be explained by that country's origins.

After the Portuguese capture of Malacca in 1511, the port and capital, Banda Atjeh, became the new centre for Muslim commercial activity on the eastern side of the Indian Ocean. Much pepper was grown in Atjeh and its dependencies, and Banda Atjeh also became a major collecting centre for Moluccan spices and Chinese goods awaiting shipment along the old Muslim trading route through the Red Sea to Alexandria. The initial Portuguese attack had wrought havoc with Muslim shipping, but by the 1540's this route was definitely flourishing again. Sometimes the spice-laden ships from Atjeh would call at Gujerat, but more often they would take the direct route across the Indian Ocean to Aden to avoid the Portuguese.

This lively trade brought Atjeh into contact with Ottoman Turkey, which then ruled Egypt and Western Arabia. Under Selim the Conqueror and Suleiman the Magnificent, Turkey was one of the strongest powers on earth, and pursued a global policy designed to combat the forces of Spain and Portugal in the East as well as the West. Thus Atjeh and Turkey became the opposite poles of an anti-Portuguese Muslim alliance, which fitfully included also Gujerat, Bijapur and Calicut in India. In response to an Atjehnese embassy which spent more than two years in Constantinople, Turkey even sent a fleet of seventeen ships to assist Atjeh attack Malacca. Most of this fleet never got further than Aden, where it was diverted to quell a rebellion in 1567. Nevertheless some ships, gunsmiths and artillery must have reached Atjeh, for the Atjehnese always remembered that the Khalif in Stambul had given them a red Ottoman flag and a huge cannon to symbolise the protectorate he had assumed over them.

From the first major attack on Malacca in 1537 to the last in 1629, the Atjehnese seldom left the Portuguese in peace. The most famous attack in the Western world was that of 1547, when Saint Francis Xavier took a leading part in organising the defence, and then announced the hour of the Portuguese victory in a miraculous revelation. But there were other occasions when the Portuguese were much nearer to defeat.

When the first Dutch, English and French vessels went to contest the riches of the East with the Portuguese, Atjeh was one of their main objectives. Both British and Dutch could capitalise on their opposition to the Spanish and Portuguese. Lancaster, the captain of the first successful British expedition to the East (1601-4), made a good impression in Atjeh by describing the defeat of the Spanish armada, and Queen Elizabeth's alliance with Turkey. The first Dutch expedition (1599) was less well
received, perhaps because the Houtman brothers who commanded it went out of their way to explain to the Sultan the republican system of government the Dutch favoured. Nevertheless, the Dutch regained their ground quickly, and in 1601 Atjeh sent a two-man delegation to see Prince Mauritz in The Hague.

But despite these pleasantries, the Europeans made none of the progress, either political or commercial, that they made in other South-East Asian ports. The Atjehnese knew well how to keep the foreigner at arm's length. To requests for a factory or commercial agency in Atjeh, successive rulers always replied that the traditions of the country forbade foreigners to build a stone edifice or maintain troops, though they were welcome to trade peacefully on Atjehnese terms. Probably the most successful in this policy of using the Europeans for his purposes rather than theirs was Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-36), the Atjehnese Roi-Soleil. Of him the acute French observer Commodore Beaulieu remarked:

...he is so fortunate, even in things of the smallest consequence, that some people consider him to be a great sorcerer; in my opinion I consider that he has great judgment, and that everything he undertakes is not done lightly and out of season, but very maturely and with all factors taken into account. He has attacked none of his neighbours except through urgent necessity or some great grievance; all his schemes begin with moves which one cannot understand until the blow is struck; ... and as he is completely absolute, and what he orders is instantly carried out; I do not find that he has any need of demons for what he does; finally I have always heard that sorcerers are mean and miserable, and I can testify he is the most opulent of his neighbours.

Iskandar Muda's conquests extended throughout the Straits of Malacca region and as far afield as Pahang (on Malaya's east coast). The people of Patani (formerly a Malay state, now in Thailand) were in constant fear of him. His influence must have extended even to Brunei, which adopted a constitutional structure in this period based on the Atjehnese model.

Northern Sumatra had been at the centre of the Muslim religious life of South-East Asia since 1300, but in this respect, too, the seventeenth century marks a peak. The most impressive and original Muslim writers of the region were gathered around the Atjehnese court during this period. Most of them tended towards a somewhat heterodox mysticism bordering on pantheism, which had the effect, and sometimes also the intention, of making their faith more acceptable to a people long accustomed to spiritualising their whole material environment.

In his patronage of such theologians, Iskandar Muda has sometimes been compared to his near contemporary, the Mughal Akbar. In both cases too, an orthodox reaction set in very soon after the death of these powerful rulers. But whatever the prevailing trend, there is plenty of evidence that Atjeh saw itself, and was seen, as the centre of Muslim influence in South-East Asia.

In 1668 Atjeh sent a solemn mission to the Thai court to invite King Narai to become a Muslim. If Christian missionary accounts can be believed (which they probably cannot on this question), the conversion of Makassar (in faraway Celebes) was also the result of the decision of its rulers to invite missionaries from Muslim Atjeh and Christian Malacca, and to accept that whoever arrived first had the blessing of God. The Portuguese, the missionaries complained, were so dilatory that they lost the race and with it a fine prize for Christendom. This story is not mentioned in the Makassarese chronicles, which ought to know, but it indicates nevertheless the popular view of Atjeh's importance in Muslim expansion.

Only four years after Iskandar Muda’s death, his
daughter ascended the Atjehnese throne to begin a sixty-year period in which four successive women ruled this Islamic Sultanate. The very plausible explanation given for this remarkable phenomenon by some observers of the time was that the Atjehnese aristocracy was determined that the Sultan should never again be powerful enough to terrorise them as Iskandar Muda had done. But it is remarkable that during the same period another Malay Sultanate, Patani, was also experiencing a series of female rulers, as had the Javanese Muslim centre of Java a century earlier. Indonesian feminists have made some capital out of this phenomenon, but historians have yet to explain it satisfactorily.

The ending of female rule is easier to explain, in terms of a more legalistic religious trend represented in Atjeh by some Arab immigrants who preached against female rule.

The period from the introduction of female rule in 1641 to the invasion of Atjeh by the Dutch in 1873 is often portrayed as one of unrelieved decline. It is true that there was a fairly steady decline in the relative commercial importance of Banda Atjeh, until by the mid-nineteenth century it was only a minor port for the Bay of Bengal. Dutch and British commercial predominance drew trade to their respective ports—Batavia (as it was then known), Malacca, Padang; and later Penang and Singapore. The result was a decline in the revenues of the court, and the power and magnificence of the Sultanate. But this should not obscure the continued evidence of Atjehnese initiative in adapting to new political and commercial conditions.

This is particularly true in the production of pepper. The original Atjehnese pepper-fields were exhausted by about 1600, and the Dutch and English therefore sought to extract the profitable spice from the sometimes unwilling inhabitants of South and Central Sumatra and other islands. But in the late eighteenth century, mainly on the initiative of Lebai Dapa, the energetic chief of the hitherto obscure port of Singkil, a stream of Atjehnese began to leave their homes to colonise new pepper-growing settlements along the sparsely populated west coast. Their achievement was so spectacular that within two decades this region was producing about half the world’s requirements of pepper, to the great profit of themselves and the American traders who came to collect it.

Atjeh remained the world’s leading pepper producer until the Dutch invasion, but the necessities of soil exhaustion meant that new states were constantly arising on the initiative of chiefs in other areas. There was never a shortage of such entrepreneurs. Another figure almost as successful as Lebai Dapa was Teuku Muda Nyak Malim, who founded and ruled the colony of Simpang Ulum in eastern Atjeh from about 1850 until the Dutch expelled him in 1878. Again the jungle was turned to pepper-gardens, but Teuku Muda and some of his lieutenants went further than their predecessors in buying their own large vessels and taking their pepper to market in Penang, rather than allowing this aspect of the trade to fall into Chinese or European hands.

Teuku Muda and a few other successful contemporaries even invested their profits in lucrative properties in Penang. Thus the faded grandeur of the dilapidated royal palace in the capital obscured very real commercial progress in the country as a whole. Well might an Atjehnese envoy explain to the American Consul in Singapore:

... that [though] they were not in the same state of advancement as their civilised neighbours; yet nevertheless they had produced as much and brought their products to them for a market; besides for the last fifteen years they had been advancing steadily in every respect, many of their people growing wealthy and investing their money in real estate at Penang, and if they had been let alone and in peace civilisation would have spread through his country.

In the long run Atjeh’s response to changing conditions might be considered less successful in politics than in commerce. Her suspicion of foreign encroachments made Atjeh the only major state in the Indonesian region never to sign a treaty of dependence on the Dutch East India Company. Similarly it dissuaded the British from choosing Atjeh as an easternmost base in the 1780’s in preference to Penang.

These successes had their price, however. On the one hand, there was a potentially dangerous lack of contact between the Atjehnese Sultanate and the expanding European powers. On the other, European and Chinese buyers tended to ignore the Sultan altogether and trade directly with his vassals, depriving him of what he regarded as his rightful duties on all trade.

The Sultan most acutely aware of these problems was Dja’uhar Alun Shah (1795-1824), an engaging degenerate who had acquired certain aspects of European culture aboard a British ship in his youth. He employed French and English secretaries to manage his foreign and commercial affairs, and pleaded repeatedly with the British for a military alliance which would help restore the power of the Sultanate over its vassals. He was answered with rebuffs and hostility from Penang, until Stamford Raffles intervened in his customary emphatic manner. Raffles was anxious to seize every opportunity to rebuild in Sumatra a Malay empire to replace what he regarded as the catastrophic return of Java to the Dutch. The treaty Raffles signed with Dja’uhar...
Alam in 1819 was never effective. Its only result was to induce the British plenipotentiaries, when consigning Sumatra to the care of the Dutch in the demarcation of 1824, to insist on Holland promising to continue to respect the independence of Atjeh.

It was almost another half-century before Dutch expansion brought Holland to the point of seeing this promise as an intolerable obstacle to its imperial ambition. It was not difficult for the Dutch then to bargain the question to a successful conclusion with the British—both sides recognising, of course, that the last people to be consulted were the Atjehnese. Thus in 1873 began the Dutch invasion. It was a clumsy affair, which effectively united the Atjehnese for the first time in centuries in a common stand against the invader. It proved one of the longest and bitterest of colonial wars, dragging on for forty years at a cost of about fifteen thousand fatalities on the Dutch side and perhaps ten times that number on the Atjehnese. But now and again the pressures of war lifted to allow more edifying scenes.

There was a particularly heady period between the retreat of the first Dutch expedition after losing its commander and eighty men in April 1873 and the organisation of a second Dutch expedition seven months later. The Atjehnese took advantage of the lull to launch a remarkable diplomatic offensive. They persuaded Turkey to inform Holland and the other European powers that Turkey had assumed formal suzerainty over Atjeh, as a result of the sixteenth century contact and that in 1851 when another Atjehnese envoy brought tribute to the Khalif. Needless to say, Turkey was not prepared to do anything militarily to back this claim up, but it did something to bolster Atjehnese spirits. Urgent appeals for support were also addressed to Britain, France, and America. Only the American Consul in Singapore was sympathetic, and he was reprimanded by Washington for it.

Later again, the war had its more tolerable periods. After five years of fighting their way up the valley of the Atjeh river, the Dutch declared the war over and tried the velvet glove. When this proved a complete failure the Dutch forces retreated behind a fortified area of about eighteen square miles which they thought (wrongly) they could make impregnable. There they waited, in vain, for Atjehnese hostility to cool.

From this middle period of the war come some of the more famous romantic episodes. In November 1883, for example, the British steamer Nisero was wrecked on the west coast of Atjeh, and its twenty-nine crew members were held captive by the local chief for eleven months. The Dutch wanted to punish the chief, but could not, while the British favoured granting his terms. The two governments almost came to blows before the issue was finally settled to the great profit of the chief concerned.

The idea was catching. Two years later the dashing adventurer Teuku Uma seized the European officers from another steamer in the same area. With them was the attractive wife of the Danish captain, which of course gave rise to endless romantic stories both among the Atjehnese and the British in Singapore. Hugh Clifford combined the two incidents in his historical novel A Freelance of Today, while Joseph Conrad scattered the same material among various of his books. The fascinating careers of Teuku Uma and his militant wife, Chat Nyak Din, are the subject of popular biographies in Dutch and Indonesian.

The Dutch began a more systematic conquest in 1898, and Atjehnese resistance was eventually overcome in the period 1910-14. A great legacy of bitterness against the conquerors naturally remained. More serious, however, was the enmity created within Atjehnese society between the religious teachers who inspired the later stages of guerrilla war and the uléelbalungs (regional aristocracy) who were finally induced to form a stable administration under the Dutch. This theme has been a dominant one since the Atjehnese have again been able to manage their own affairs; it has retarded considerably the successful integration of Atjehnese initiative into the national economy and polity.

Economically, Atjeh is still suffering from the effects of the long war. Very little outside capital has moved there, and the Atjehnese themselves have had relatively little opportunity to indulge their natural propensity for trade. In the 1920's a Dutch Governor of Atjeh declared that the province was necessarily isolated from the main stream of commerce by its location, and this is how it has sometimes seemed to Indonesians themselves. But looking at the map it is difficult to feel Atjeh has lost any of its strategic importance since Iskandar Muda's time.

In recent years, Atjeh has begun to enjoy that stability which can at last release the talents of its people profitably. In 1959 it was granted the Republic the unusual status of Daerah Istimewa—special (semi-autonomous) region—in tribute to the unique achievement of Atjeh in preventing any Dutch encroachment during the revolution.

Communications have been much improved of late. And in Medan, Djakarta and elsewhere, Atjehnese are already beginning to earn a place alongside the Chinese, the Batak, and the Minangkabau people as the most successful businessmen of Indonesia.

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