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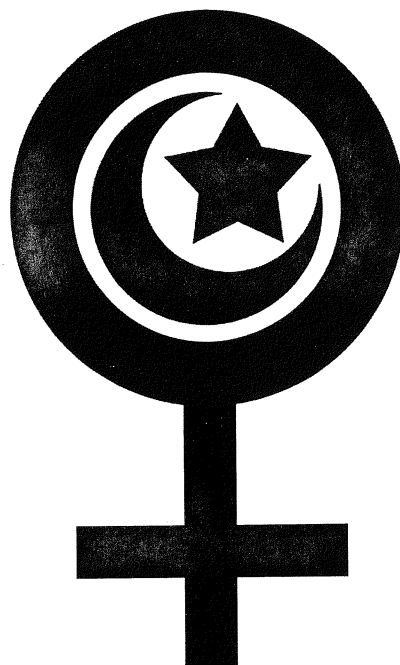
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# **INONG ACEH:**

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**An Analysis on the Changing  
Position of Women in Aceh**

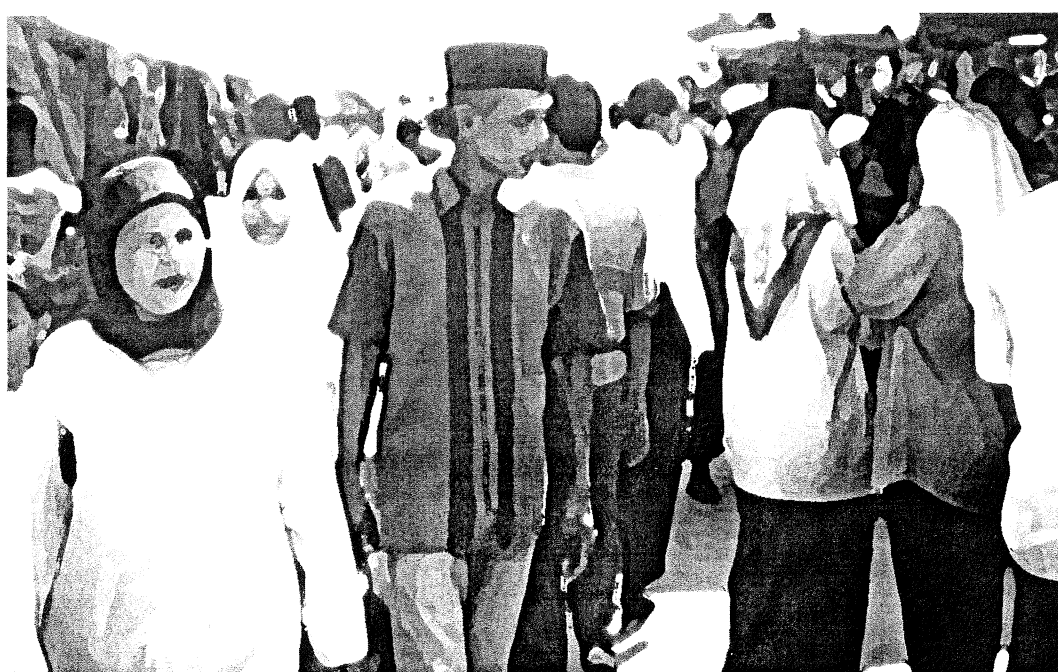


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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of  
Masters of Philosophy  
in the  
Department of Anthropology and Archaeology  
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies  
The Australian National University



# Introduction





# INTRODUCTION

Aceh is a province in Indonesia currently known to the world as another hotspot due to prolonged armed conflict. It is a troubled (or troublesome if viewed by the military) separatist province that has suffered a long period of oppression and injustice. Its natural wealth and riches have become a source of sorrow rather than prosperity.

Aceh today is often equated with the dominant ethnic group who live in the coastal area of the northern tip of Sumatra. However, the province itself is inhabited by various ethnic groups with their own distinct languages and cultures. The ethnic map provided on the previous page only lists the officially acknowledged *suku bangsa* which very roughly means "ethnic groups" as classified by the local state government. The rough terrain of Aceh contains several *suku terasing* or isolated tribes relatively unaffected by the socio-political changes in their surrounding region.

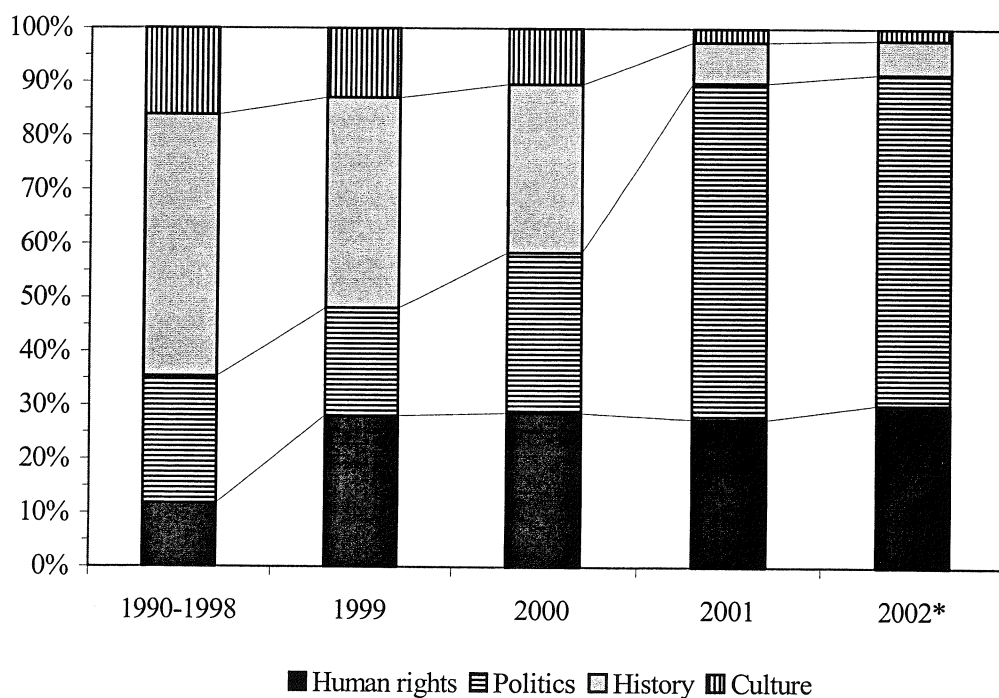
Despite this diversity, the current conflict in Aceh involves the construct of Aceh as a singular identity. Though GAM (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* or the Free Aceh Movement) claims to strive for the reestablishment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century kingdom of Aceh – whose borders even at the height of its power excluded the Gayo, Alas, Singkel and even Jameé territories – their claim encompasses the provincial borders as established by the modern Republic of Indonesia. Indeed, the recent push made by the Galaksi (Gayo-Alas-Kluet-Singkel) coalition for the formation of a new province within Indonesia separate from Aceh (Anh, 2001:A14) is violently rejected by GAM leaders who accuse the central government of devising

such a divisive idea and admonish the Galaksi leaders as ignorant of history (SERAMBI, 2000b).

## Notes on Recent Literature

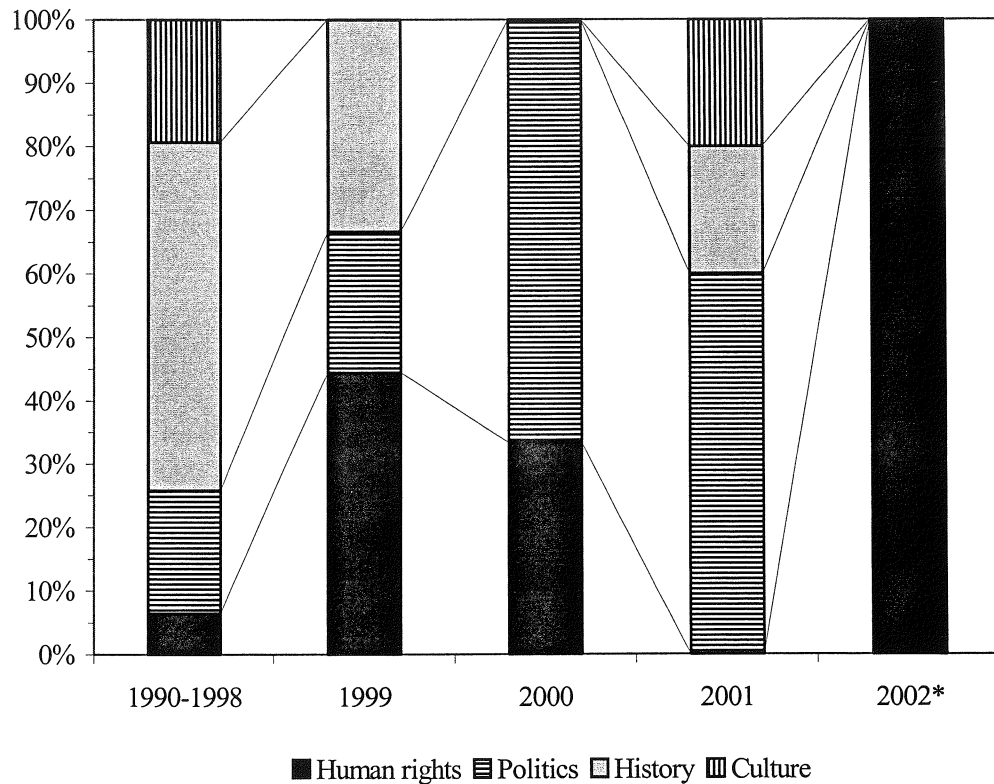
This tendency to create a united Aceh identity within the political sphere is also reflected in writings on Aceh for the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As part of the research, I have reviewed over 2000 news articles (mostly domestic) and much of the published literature on Aceh between 1990 to 2002. I have classified this material roughly into four categories: politics (statements, negotiations, policies), history (mainly pre-colonial and post-revolutionary history), human rights (military movements, abuses, refugee issues, collateral damages to civilian lives) and culture (arts, language, etc). The results indicate that for the past four years political issues dominate the Acehnese literature, far exceeding other issues.

Graph I.1.  
Topics of National Newspaper on Aceh 1990-2002



Note: \* Up to February 2002  
Source: Research data.

Graph I.2.  
Topics of Books Written About Aceh 1990-2002

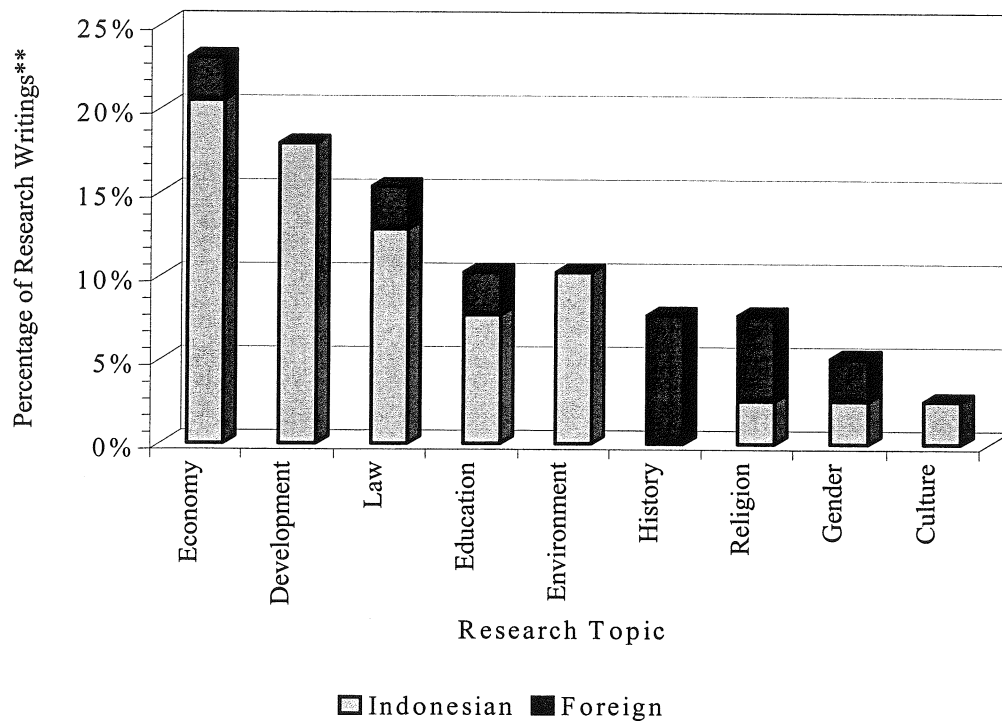


Note: \* Up to February 2002

Source: Research data.

Another search on scholarly works focusing on Aceh also yielded similar result. What is most interesting for me is the preference of the research topics. The post-DOM period that followed the infamous military operations in Aceh 1989-1998 created a boom on human rights and political writings on Aceh. These works mainly rely on materials provided by NGO investigations, legal documents as well as printed media. Sources from academic works are seldom used and those which are used are mainly historical works, usually for legitimization purposes. Even propagandist GAM publications employ materials written by established historians both local (e.g. Ibrahim Alfian or Isa Sulaiman) or foreign scholars (e.g. Eric Morris or Anthony Reid) whose major works on Aceh predate the 1990s. It is strange, however, that graph 1.3. below indicates that no recent local scholar has been interested in historical research.

Graph I.3.  
Topics of Humanities Research About Aceh Conducted Recently\*



Note: \* From January 1990 to February 2002

\*\* Include research papers, presentations and thesis.

Source: Research data.

The most common answers given when I asked local researchers during my field work about this tendency gave me the impression that Acehnese scholars are comfortable with the current form of Aceh history. Indeed, Acehnese are very proud of their history to the extent that such pride often reinforces the nostalgic sentiment of a unique and distinct ethnic-religious identity while subordinating other identities in the region. This may explain why the notion of a separate Galaksi province mentioned earlier is met with hostility by the separatist-leaning Acehnese.

In terms of inter-ethnic relations, the current condition in Aceh is similar to the macroscopic condition of inter-ethnic relations within Indonesia. There is a relationship between a dominant ethnic group – the Acehnese in the case of Aceh and the Javanese in the case of Indonesia –

with other minority ethnic groups. In both cases there is a strong nationalist sentiment among the dominant ethnic group overriding any breakaway movement (Galaksi in the case of Aceh and, ironically, Aceh in the case of Indonesia). Both nationalist sentiments are rhetorically justified in using sentiments of "historical unity" (the pre-colonial kingdom of Aceh and in the case of Indonesia, though more reluctantly admitted by Javanese politicians, the ancient kingdom of Majapahit).

What I find most disturbing is that these "convenient" historical accounts have become so commonly used that it is often taken as a constant. Researches in local development, economy and law – the top three research topics as seen in graph I.3. – have been largely viewed by writers with suspicion and were constantly ignored in the increasingly popular politically provocative literary format. The most common excuse given to me in the field is that the data can be ignored because "they are the government's numbers." This is quite unacceptable academically because no matter how suspicious these research results are, they are nevertheless *official* data which often determine official policymaking. Dismissal of these researches will lead to an overreliance on analytical extrapolations based on a distant pre-Republic history, which can drag Acehnese scholars into the role of political spokespersons. Indeed, without mentioning names, I have concluded from my readings that the current conflict has forced Acehnese scholars to be partial in their analysis.

## Notes on the Thesis

In this thesis I will examine the second least researched topic on Aceh shown in graph I.3. (the first is "culture" which is too broad a topic). This

topic is gender. I would like to present the reader with an overview of the changing status and role of women in an industrialising Aceh. I want to look at how social change brought by modernisation is influencing existing social constructs, specifically gender relations. This thesis will be an exercise in feminist cultural constructionist analysis (e.g. Chodorow, 1978; Rosaldo, 1980). Reiter (1975) argued that the gender asymmetry that does exist in many societies is caused by differences in power, class and production. It is these differences that shape gender identities in a society. The thesis will attempt to find relationships between economic conditions and existing cultural values throughout the available historical data. It will present the type of identity that is attributed to Acehnese women by dominant political and religious agencies through the media, examine the cause and context for this identity, and attempt to explain how Acehnese men and women respond to such constructs.

In order to achieve this aim, the research has included textual and statistical analysis from data available from local libraries and the provincial bureau of statistics. Data from previous research – mostly local – will also be used. The research also relies on interviews with Acehnese predominantly of elite backgrounds (*Ulama*, academic, activists, etc). It should be noted that I have also engaged in participant observation of local public activities. This was done with the full permission of the parties involved.

The most difficult task in data processing turned out not to be transcribing interviews, but rather the processing of statistical data. The Indonesian Bureau of Statistics has developed a reputation among



researchers – especially foreign – for its inconsistent and unreliable data, especially during the early years of the New Order. I compensated for these “at-the-moment” misleading representations by cross-checking with other independent sources (e.g. NGO surveys, investigative reports, newspaper articles, journals) as well as compiling existing data into historical sequences, thereby identifying “anomalies.” Most of the time, the data is most unreliable in Indonesian election years (where buildings have been known to appear and disappear on paper.) However, the charts and tables presented in this thesis have been prepared with an attempt to allow for such errors.

This thesis is divided into six chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter provides a socio-historical background of Aceh up to the present. In order to address the problems mentioned above, I conclude that the first part of this thesis is a reassessment of the ongoing widely accepted history of Aceh. Then I follow up with the argument that despite improvements to the condition of women's lives, Acehnese women remain marginalised in the political sphere. The second chapter will dissect how the image of Acehnese women has been presented in public, and to what purpose. Afterwards, special attention will be given to economic factors, and leadership issues. The third chapter describes the domestic life of Acehnese women especially in regard to married life. Chapter four is an examination of Acehnese women in the work force. Chapter five will describe the positions of leadership available to Acehnese women. Chapter six will present case studies from my fieldwork: accounts of three public meetings with an analysis of the gender interaction.

## Notes on the Research

Long before undertaking my field work, I had lived in Aceh for ten years during my childhood and know its people to be friendly, generous, hard working, and honest despite the negative stereotypes that seem to prevail in Indonesia today. I am an Indonesian of mixed ethnicity (so are my parents) and although I have travelled to so many places in my brief life, I wholeheartedly adopt Aceh as my place of origin.

When the current troubles in Aceh began, I was already studying abroad. While attempting to start my postgraduate study, it struck me that I might be able to contribute something back to the people of Aceh. It may not be much, but it will certainly be an effort that is feasible.

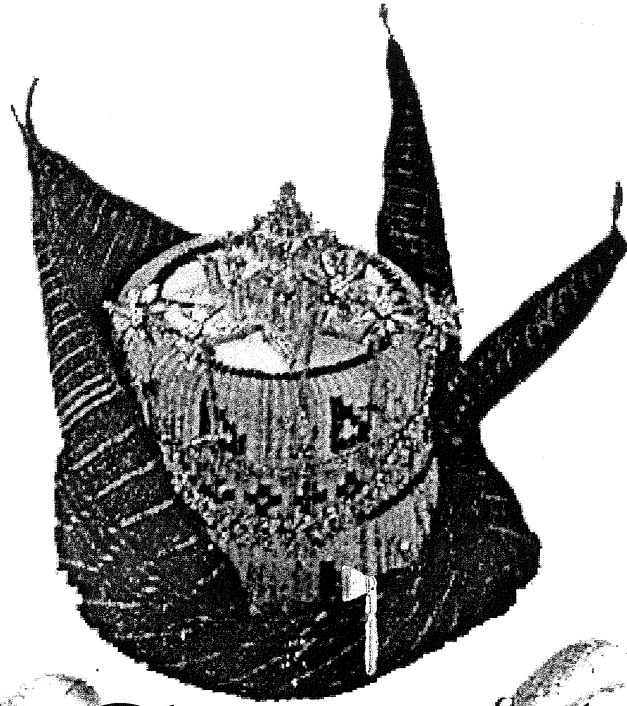
At first there were initial concerns regarding my departure to do field work in a known danger zone. However, once these technical barriers were overcome I found myself having quite an interesting time in Aceh.

I spent most of my field work in the capital, Banda Aceh. It is there that the changes in Acehnese society are most visible (not to mention it being the safest area in the province). I stayed at the home of the family of Prof Bahrein T. Sugihen, a professor of Sociology at the University of Syiahkuala, who is also a longtime family friend. During my brief three-months' research, I experienced a number of major events that occurred in Aceh. I was welcomed by the greatest flood in over 50 years that hit Aceh when I arrived. I came at a very good time, under the circumstances. It was at the time of the second human rights ceasefire (*Jeda Kemanusiaan II*) so the situation was less tense. It was the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan,

which meant that in addition to public religious events I was also invited to many wedding ceremonies. After 11 weeks in Aceh, I continued my research by studying the Acehnese expatriate communities in Bogor and Yogyakarta on the island of Java. I also spent some time with Acehnese expatriates in Sydney shortly after I returned.

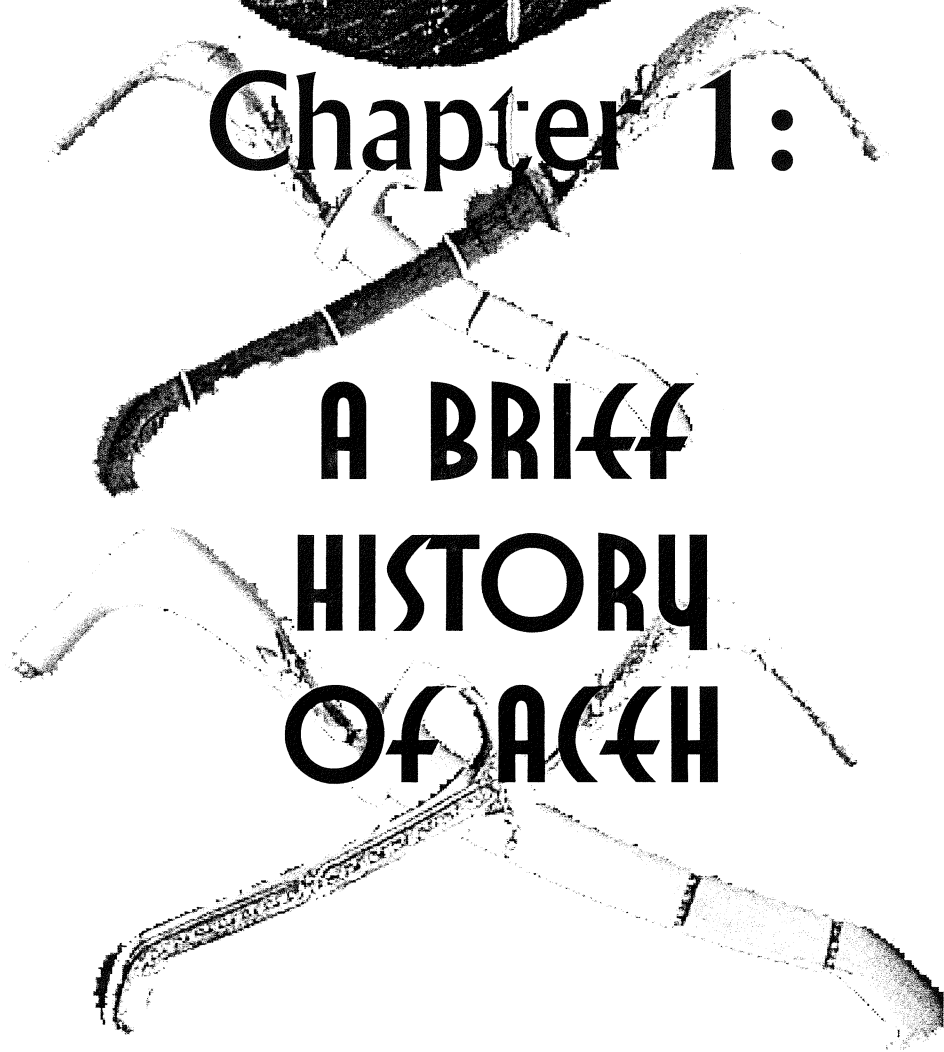
While I spent the last year writing up after my return, development have occurred in Aceh at a rapid pace. The most significant ones are the change of government in Indonesia (through unorthodox means) from President Abdurrahman Wahid to President Megawati, the change of approach to the problem of Aceh by the government, the increased crackdown by the military, the prolonged impasse in GAM-Indonesian government negotiations, the official implementation of *Syari'ah* law (Islamic law) in Aceh, and most recently, the killing of Teuku Abdullah Syafi'ie, the GAM field commander). For my purposes I treat these developments as the consequence of the long-term socio-economic dynamics in Aceh. By examining the period from the beginning to the end of the New Order regime I want to focus on the effects of development and government policies particularly in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.





# Chapter 1:

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF ACEH





## Chapter One:

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF ACEH

Aceh is a resource-rich province of Indonesia. It is located at the northern tip of the Island of Sumatra, geographically placed in the strategic end of the Malacca Strait. As such, it has always been visited by traders mainly of Indian, Persian, Arabic and Chinese origin. Aceh was once a society with a dominant Hindu-animist beliefs. Indeed, the ancient Hindu kingdom of Indra Patra once stood on the previous site of the Muslim Pasai kingdom. Its legacy can be found in various temple ruins (the most famous is the ruins of Indra Puri temple, which at one time had been converted into a mosque by Sultan Iskandar Muda) that are scattered along Aceh's coastline and during World War II they were often transformed into bunkers for military purposes. Most Acehnese have mixed physical characteristics of various ethnic groups. In the coastal areas where the population are descendants of seafaring traders, their physical appearance indicates mainly the Malay, Indo-Chinese, and Arab influences. As a rough cultural marker, the inland Acehnese – the Gayo – bear Indian names (e.g. Asry, Bangkaru, Gade, Polim, Sawitry, Tiba, etc.) rather than the more common Arabic and Islamic names used in the coastal areas.

Not many contemporary Acehnese like to be reminded of the Hindu legacy. This is illustrated in John Bowen's work on the Gayo where he described in detail the conflicts between non-Islamic and Islamic traditions (1993). The Acehnese prefer to underline their "more recent" historical legacy since the introduction of Islam.

Aceh culture is much influenced by Islamic civilisation. It is the region with the oldest history of Islamic impact in Indonesia, as the first Islamic kingdom founded in Aceh as early as the 9th century. Historians speculate that Islam entered Aceh with traders from Arabia or Persia who taught Islam while waiting for the seasonal winds to carry their ships back from Aceh across the Indian ocean. Islam was introduced gradually rather than through violent conquest, allowing for a slow accommodation to pre-existing cultural values.

Photo 1.1.

The ruins of the fort of Indra Patra. It is located 23 km east of Banda Aceh



However, Acehnese today romanticise Islam's arrival in Aceh. Unlike Java or Sulawesi whose Muslims commonly credit individual actors – such as the *Wali Songo* (nine Holy men) or Sulawesi's five *Wali* from Aceh – with the role of spreading Islam to the population, the most common reply I received when interviewing Muslim Acehnese respondents regarding their knowledge of Islam's origins in Aceh is that it happened at one particular moment (but they don't know when). Written sources credited "traders" and quoted "witnesses" without citing any name of an individual Islamic evangelist. Locals are depicted as accepting this spread of Islam



immediately without resistance, which is – considering the pattern of Islamic spread in Southeast Asia – highly unlikely. Unless a local ruler embraced it or became its patron then Islam would have to spread gradually rather than being taken up in a revolutionary moment. Indeed, individual actors are credited in spreading Islam *from* Aceh. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, King Parameswara of Malacca began an alliance with the Acehnese kingdom of Pasai by embracing Islam and marrying one of his daughters to the ruler (Shaw and Ali, 1970:2).

I found deliberate avoidance in discussing pre-Islamic Aceh either by declaring ignorance or by diverting the matter into comparisons of how things are much better under Islam. It is as if there is a desire for the image of the Acehnese to be that of the first instantly devout Muslims in the region. Hostile responses when contrary claims were even suggested have happened. TAS, a historian from Unsyiah, illustrates this attitude.

Once an artist painted Putroe Pang [a famous Malay princess who wed the Acehnese Sultan Iskandar Muda] with bare-breasts as was most likely the custom of the time [presumably an ancient Hindu custom much like women in Balinese villages today]. This artist was condemned by the public as a degenerate and the painting was regarded as nothing but a dirty fantasy.

This prudish attitude toward representing the past is nothing new in Aceh. It is indicative of how Acehnese want to present themselves to the outside world. The first advice I received from Acehnese or non-Acehnese alike before going to the field is that I should never question the “Muslimness” of an Acehnese or Aceh in general as they would treat it as an insult. In the field, while my respondents told me they agree with this advice, they

constantly complained about how increasingly Acehnese (usually among the youth) behaved in un-Islamic way. Jayawardena (1977) and Yeoh (1994) indicated that conflict in Aceh is usually generational. The older generation complained about the youth, usually in regard to their lack of morality and the youth complained about their elders, usually in regard to their elders' stubborn conservatism (often referred to as being *kolot*).

## 1.1. Re-Imagining an Islamic History

Although religion has always played a strong role in Southeast Asian social movements, Islam in Aceh has a history of conservatism. In various kingdoms that existed in Aceh (Pasai, Peureulak, Pedir, Aceh), Sultans relied on the approval of the Mufti (royal religious advisors) – a position institutionalised in Aceh as *Khadi Malikul Adil* by Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636) – for religious legitimisation of any cultural practices that they maintained or introduced (Rusdi, 1994:43; Syamsuddin, 1998:9). The most common proverb used by Acehnese to describe the relationship between culture and Islam is the last two lines of *Hadih Maja*:

*Hukom ngon adat,*                      [Islamic] law and customary tradition,  
*lagee zat ngon sifeut.*                is like substance and its attributes.

(Hasjmy, 1996:18)

Tradition and religion are viewed as inseparable, one cannot exist without the other. Such claims are not uniquely Acehnese. Members of another Islamic society, the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, make similar statements regarding Islam and tradition (Blackwood, 1993; Whalley, 1993). However, unlike the situation in pre-colonial West Sumatra where wars were fought by Islamic reformers against traditional conservatives, in Aceh

Islamic reform is a 20<sup>th</sup> century movement. Most of the time, religious leaders have been keen to keep things as they are. Islamic identity is important to Acehnese in general (Amir, 2002). The claim "Aceh has always been Islamic, there is no need for further changes" was repeatedly mentioned during my interviews. Among non-Acehnese Muslims, such statements can seem like arrogance or fanaticism.

This oft-repeated claim can be seen as indicative of a process of building a local identity as an Islamic identity. One reason for engaging in such a process is the belief in an Islamic state as the ideal state common in most Muslim societies. While the idea was constantly contested in nationalist debates about the form of a modern Indonesian state, the public debate was about finding the proper form for its implementation rather than questioning the idea of an Islamic state itself. Acehnese politicians have always employed Islamic cultural symbolism, but Islamic practices are never legally enforced. For example, traditional practices of gambling, drinking alcohol, and prostitution all exist and are always blamed on a perceived "un-Islamic" governance. The fact that Islam has never dominated formal politics in Aceh is something that drew ire when mentioned to Ulama that I interviewed. After the *kaphé* (infidel) rule of the Dutch and the nationalist rule of the Indonesian Republic, there is currently a firm belief – particularly among the political and religious elite – that a "return" to Islamic rule is the best solution in Aceh.

## 1.2. Political Aceh

The historical dynamics of Acehnese politics has been dominated by the rise and decline of the Ulama. Siegel (1969) described at great length of

how pre-colonial Aceh was ruled by a three-way power sharing between the Sultan, the Uleebalang, and the Ulama. The Uleebalang were leaders in trade and politics at a district level; the Ulama were the religious leaders in control of educational institutions, the *pesantren*; the Sultan was the official patron of cultural affairs of the kingdom. His power was dependent on how well he managed and mediated affairs among and with the other leaders. While ascension to the Sultanate was hereditary (the prerogative of members of particular lineages) it was essential for rulers to gain the support of the Uleebalang and Ulama for the legitimacy of the reign. This arrangement was because the Uleebalang and Ulama are the true co-managers of the local population.

During and after the Acehnese colonial wars in late-19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century which lasted for more than three decades, the Dutch colonial regime destroyed the Sultanate and recruited the Uleebalang as indirect rulers. The Ulama became the spearhead of resistance during the 30 year Aceh war (Hurgronje, 1906a:177; Yeoh, 1994:85-92). The war was extremely costly for the Dutch government. While it attracted considerable sympathy for the Acehnese from Muslims in many parts of the world at the time, the war fostered the view – perpetuated by Orientalists of the time (e.g. Snouck Hurgronje, H.C. Zentgraaf, H.T. Damsté, and J.A. Kruijt) – that the Acehnese were anarchic, violent, and treacherous Muslim fanatics (Reid, 1969:288; Yeoh, 1994:x).

The passion for religious war which is so deeply rooted in the teaching of Islam is more marked among the Acehnese than with the majority of their fellow-believers

in other lands, who have come by experience to regard it as a relic of a bygone age (Hurgronje, 1906b: 337).

Prior to the 1945 independence of Indonesia, the Uleebalang were recruited as functionaries under Dutch rule (Siegel, 1969:14-34). Their legitimacy was gradually eroded by the Dutch and Japanese occupations. The image of Uleebalang "selling out" to the *kaphé*, though not entirely true, was exploited by the Ulama. After the declaration of independence in 1945, there was a series of violent conflicts between the Ulama which favoured integration into the newly proclaimed Republic of Indonesia and the "Dutch collaborator", the Uleebalang. This destroyed the Uleebalang class (Sulaiman, 1997:1). These conflicts – most notoriously the Cumbok wars (1945-1946) where pro-Dutch Uleebalang were destroyed by nationalist Ulama – destroyed the remaining public legitimacy of the Uleebalang and left the Acehnese with only one source of political power. Leadership was passed into the hands of the Ulama, creating essentially a centralised power structure (for details of the Cumbok wars, see Sulaiman, 1990). The Ulama came to wield both political and religious power.

In Aceh Islam provided a rallying point for the fight against the *kaphé* colonialists, but it failed to do the same for the Indonesian central government. The incorporation of Aceh into the North Sumatra province of Indonesia was a severe blow to Acehnese pride resulting in the 1950s *Darul Islam* (House of Islam) rebellion. This rebellion aimed to achieve the status of an Islamic State for Aceh. The rebellion led by Tengku Muhammad Daud Beureueh – a distinguished Ulama and revolutionary leader of the independence war – managed to achieve the status of *Daerah Istimewa* (Special Region) for the province of Aceh but failed to deliver an Islamic

State. The Ulama reached the limits of their political expansion and settled for a non-political role within the government by a nationalist (though theistic) Republic of Indonesia.

The rebellion remains the high point of unity for Acehese Ulama. Afterwards, successive Indonesian governments – the Old Order of Sukarno, the New Order of Suharto and to some extent the current Reform government – have always maintained a close control over the Ulama either through economic enticements or coercive measures (Yeoh, 1994:185-186). Despite denials (Kompas, 1997a and 1997c), some Ulama were recruited by the New Order government to promote government policies and support the ruling party Golkar in the election campaigns. This approach was partially successful in that government social welfare programs (e.g. family planning, public education, etc) were relatively successful while most economic programs failed, creating an ongoing general discontent.<sup>1</sup>

To be fair, during the New Order, up to the early 1980s, the Acehese Ulama also became the focal point of resistance to the State – but were not as powerful as during the colonial war – considering the enemy was more difficult to identify as *kaphé*. The Muslim party PPP,<sup>2</sup> which annoyed the government-backed Golkar, dominated the 1970s and 1980s general elections in Aceh. There were few other areas in Indonesia where

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<sup>1</sup> During fieldwork I find that any Acehese in the street can quote the “Only 3% profits from Acehese natural resources were returned to Aceh” argument regardless of the questionable accuracy of the estimate.

<sup>2</sup> PPP (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* or the United Development Party) was formed in 1973 as a result of merging existing Islam-based political parties.

Golkar<sup>3</sup> did not gain the majority of seats. Only after the New Order central government attempted to assert its authority in Aceh by using Muslim symbols in political campaigns,<sup>4</sup> and only after NU<sup>5</sup> withdrew its support from PPP in protest at the government implementation of the *azas tunggal*<sup>6</sup> did Golkar manage to narrowly defeat PPP in the 1987 election.

Table 1.1.  
Election Results in Aceh (in % of seats, numbers in brackets are national results)

| Election | PPP              | Golkar          | PDI              | Other Parties   |
|----------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1955     | 77.22%* (43.7%)  |                 | 4.54%** (22.3%)  | 18.24% (15.4%)  |
| 1971     | 48.89%* (21.26%) | 49.71% (62.8%)  | 4.67%** (12.67%) |                 |
| 1977     | 57.28% (29.2%)   | 41.17% (62.11%) | 1.55% (8.69%)    |                 |
| 1982     | 59.56% (27.78%)  | 36.39% (64.37%) | 4.05% (7.85%)    |                 |
| 1987     | 43.00% (15.96%)  | 51.89% (73.17%) | 5.11% (10.87%)   |                 |
| 1992     | 33.33% (17.17%)  | 58.33% (68.13%) | 8.34% (14.7%)    |                 |
| 1997     | 33.33% (22.43%)  | 63.89% (74.5%)  | 2.78%+ (3.07%)   |                 |
| 1999     | 29.16% (12.55%)  | 16.67% (25.97%) | 12.5%++ (0.43%)  | 41.67% (61.04%) |

Notes:

\* In the 1955 and 1971 elections, the numbers refer to Islam-based parties. PPP was formed in 1973 as the result of merging these parties.

\*\* In the 1955 and 1971 elections, the numbers refer to nationalist parties. PDI was formed in 1973 as the result of a forced merger of these parties.

+ In 1996 the government forcibly removed Megawati from the PDI leadership, thus resulting in decline in support in 1997 election. It also resulted in the formation of PDI-P as a Megawati led version of PDI.

++ This is the number for PDI while the PDI-P is still grouped under Other Parties (a whopping 41.67%).

Source: DPRD Aceh

The 1999 election, though boycotted in several regions in Aceh, resulted in a return to PPP dominance in the local parliament, though not as

<sup>3</sup> Golkar (*Golongan Karya*) is the government-backed political party of the New Order era.

<sup>4</sup> The practice ranged from distributing Islamic prayer-books littered with Golkar logos, instructing party campaigners to wear “Muslim clothing”, renovating (even building) mosques, to paying Ulama to endorse government programs. The practice is commonly referred to by locals as *prang ayat* (battle of Quranic verses).

<sup>5</sup> NU (*Nadhlatul Ulama*) is the largest Muslim party in Indonesia. Before the implementation of *azas tunggal*, it is a strong basis for the PPP political party. Its withdrawal from politics – known as the *khittah* – severely damaged support for the PPP. In the 1999 election, NU returned to politics by supporting the PKB (*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa*, a political party considered to be the political arm of NU).

<sup>6</sup> *Azas tunggal* (sole principle) is the enforcement of the embracing of state ideology of Pancasila as the ideological basis for all political organisations.

strong as before. While this can be credited to traditional loyalties, PPP pre-eminence strengthens the already existing stereotype that Aceh is a Muslim fundamentalist society, not unlike Iran.

### 1.3. DOM

In 1977, one of the former leaders of the Darul Islam rebellion, Tengku Hasan di Tiro, supported by a small group of rebellious Acehnese declared an independent Sultanate of Aceh. Claiming a noble bloodline, he declared himself Sultan and the *wali nangroe* (state caretaker) of an Islamic Sultanate of Aceh. This rebellious movement – GAM (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*) or the Free Aceh Movement – started out small, yet soon grew in intensity to the point that it began to disrupt industrial activities in North Aceh district, a place rich in oil and natural gas resources which is economically important to the central government of Indonesia.

As a result, in 1989 the central government launched a military operation – *Operasi Jaring Merah* (Operation Red Net) – aimed at the destruction of the movement. The operation grew into a brutal war of attrition which ended only when the New Order government ended in 1998 with the resignation of President Suharto. Acehnese hatred towards the militaristic centralised government grew, especially among the youth. The period between 1989 and 1998 is known as the DOM (*Daerah Operasi Militer* or zone of military operation) period. The end of DOM as officially declared by Gen. Wiranto in mid-1998 witnessed rapid growth in factional political activities in Aceh. The major political players are the government, the Ulama, the military, the LSMs (*Lembaga Swadaya Masyarakat* or non-government organisations) and the student movement. Memberships often



overlap which can create (for an outside observer) an image of political disunity or chaotic political leadership in Aceh.

During the New Order, the Acehnese Ulama were divided between the pro- and anti-central government factions (Yeoh, 1994:142-214). The "government Ulama" - especially those whose *pesantren* received funding from the government (Yeoh, 1994:138-141) - were accused by Acehnese dissidents either of being collaborators or of being guilty of silence. These accusations diminished the image of the Ulama and their role as the spearhead of resistance. Older generations of Ulama believed that separation from Indonesia would further destabilise Aceh while younger ones openly supported (or at least sympathised with) separatism be it with or without GAM. The Acehnese Ulama are now as divided as ever. There are at least four different Ulama associations (PUSA, HUDA, PD Inshafuddin and MUI) with political loyalties crisscrossing Islamic political parties. For example, Ulama can be a member of both PUSA (*Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh*, the main Aceh-based Ulama counsel) and MUI (*Majlis Ulama Indonesia*, the national Ulama assembly) as well as holding a seat at the People's Representative Council, yet at the same time being publicly known to be a Golkar functionary. There are some Ulama that can hold positions in several religious and government organisations at the same time. Consequently, clashes of interests are common and the commonly-used identity put forward to express this difference is a specific Ulama organisation.

It is also no coincidence that the oppositional political factions are also sharply divided in terms of their demography. Members of the

government, the Ulama, and the military leaders are predominantly over 40 years old while members of the LSMs and the student movements are under 40. During and after the DOM era, parts of the resistance leadership shifted to university students and LSMs. Neither legitimise their authority primarily through religion yet still maintain a claim that what they do is Islamic. In times of rapid social change, the conservatism of the Ulama is often translated into political partisanship; specifically they are accused of being “pro-status quo” (re: supporting the government). Resistance to the Ulama – especially among the younger generation – is based on the claim that they are no longer the sole purveyors of religious legitimacy. Calls for a halt to the Ulama’s monopoly on representing Acehnese in official public discourse as well as calls for a more “agreeably humanist” interpretation of religious texts are among the strongest demands made by these resistance movements.

#### 1.4. Maintaining The Islamic Image

Aceh’s “Muslim fundamentalist” reputation – expressed in the commonly used nickname “Serambi Mekah” (the front porch of Mecca) – often employed in describing Aceh is overstated. Despite the grand promises of the Ulama since the Colonial war of creating a “purer” Islam in Aceh, the Acehnese retain most of the traditional practices inherited from pre-Islamic times. “Un-Islamic practices” like the *Kanduri*, *Achura*, or *Mo’lot*<sup>7</sup> observed

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<sup>7</sup> These are traditional ritual feasts celebrating special events like engagements, weddings, childbirth, death, etc. The introduction of Islam provided new contexts to these rituals. They are now used to celebrate Islamic events. For example, *Kanduri* was incorporated into Islamic events like *Kanduri huroe rayeuk* (Ied-al-Fitr feast), while *Mo’lot* celebrates the Prophet’s birthday. Although *Achura* originally was a Zoroastrian ritual, it is now practiced solely by Shi’ites, commemorating the death of the Prophet’s son.

a century ago (Hurgronje, 1906a and 1906b) remain widely practiced today (Siapno, 1997). The forms of these practices – even the names – retain Hindu characteristics which predated the introduction of Islam to the region. The reason there is no “standard” Islam is that all of its sects, orders, or other local varieties hold the same claim of representing “authentic Islam.” Membership size is the base for legitimating this claim.

For current political purposes the Ulama have an interest in maintaining the perception of an Islamic Acehese society. However, historical and political circumstances have eroded their influence in Acehese society. Rapid social change has impacted on all aspects of social relationships in Aceh. The Ulama rely on their schools and agriculture for income. The schools draw donations from parents who enroll their children to study religion, while the farmlands owned by the Ulama is jointly managed by local farmers. Increasingly, the Ulama must compete with a more secular system. For a start, the basis of their strength – the religious schools – have been challenged by the state education system (see chapter four) – especially through the New Order educational policies – which is always an important source of social change anywhere in Indonesia. State schools have improved their quality (see chapter four) by increasing the number of teachers. State schools also attract teachers who have graduated from both state and religious schools, due to the relatively easier entry requirements, that no formal religious educational background is required. Few religious school graduates are able to find employment in the non-religious schools as the only posts available in state schools are limited to *guru agama* (teacher in the subject of religion). This is a strong disincentive for studying in religious schools in an increasingly modernising society. To

make matters worse, traditional religious schools no longer have a monopoly on producing new Ulama. Modern religious institutions – like the state subsidised Institute for Islamic Studies or the IAIN (Institut Agama Islam Negeri) – offer both religious and secular tertiary education. Students aspiring to become Ulama can choose between the traditional or the more “modern” religious education. As a result, more religious schools (*pesantren* and *madrasah*) have grown dependent on government subsidies to remain operational. The Ulama who prefer Aceh to remain in Indonesia are the ones dependent on these subsidies, while those who want an independent Aceh are those who have no ties to the government (Source: interviews).

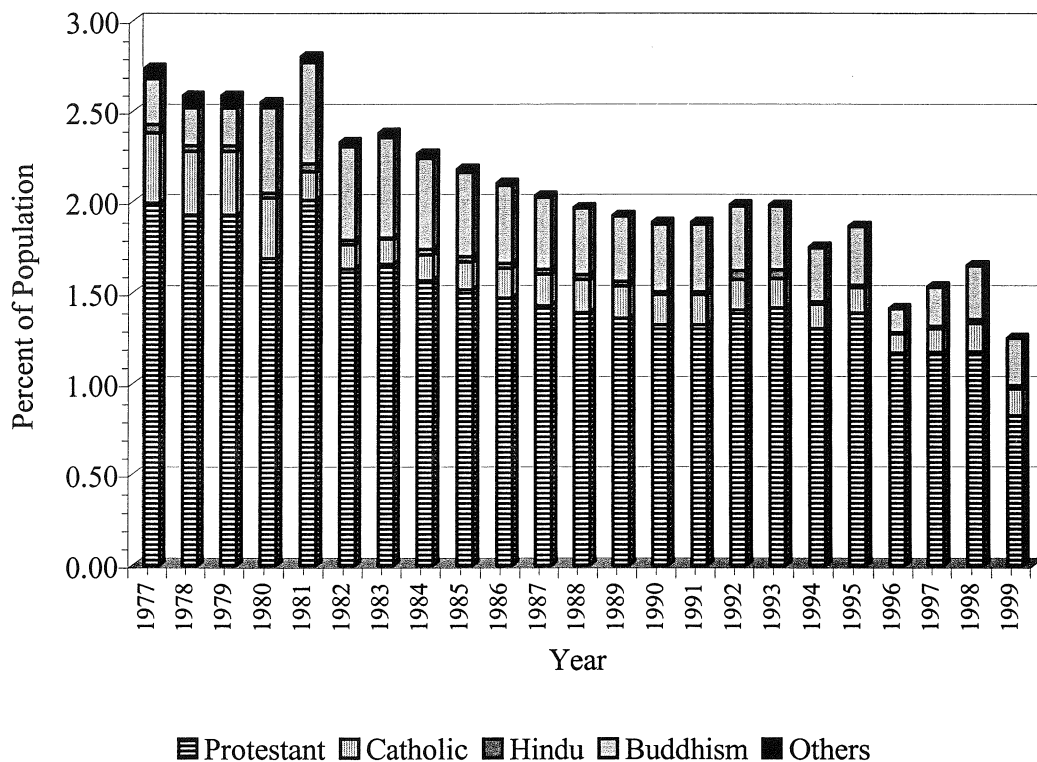
In late 2000, GAM formally declared their cause to be nationalist rather than religious: they sought nothing less than an independent Aceh and did not pursue the idea of an Islamic state. The only allies of the Ulama left in employing the images of Islam in politics is the Indonesian government, which has a vested interest in keeping the “Islamic fundamentalist Aceh” image alive. Central governments in Indonesia have a tradition of using Islam as a form of local appeasement in Aceh. This ranges from the Dutch building large mosques while restricting Ulama from politics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the recent endeavour to shore up Ulama support for the central government by the imposition of *Syariah* law in Aceh which is seen by many Acehnese as redundant, hollow, and unnecessary. The New Order government's fear-campaign suggesting that Indonesia (including Aceh) was a hotbed of inter-religious conflicts – which justified military presence and eventually the DOM status in Aceh – is no longer valid. Indeed, in the early days of the Megawati government in 2001, the

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Iwan Dzulvan Amir

President approved the imposition of *Syariah* law in Aceh while the DPR officially branded GAM as a separatist movement, thus enabling a shift in the diplomatic and military stand in Aceh. This has something to do with the recent strengthening of Islamic political parties in Indonesia. *Syariah* law in Aceh provides a prestigious project for these parties while allowing the military to resume their operations without having to worry about anyone using Islam as a separatist rallying call.

Graph 1.1.  
Registered Non-Muslims in Aceh



Note: The percentage of registered Muslims in Aceh have increased from approximately 97.2% (1977) to 98.8% (1999).

Source: Compiled from BPS data

As shown in Graph 1.1., Aceh is a province whose population is over 97 percent Muslim (and this proportion is increasing). Christianisation – often argued by alarmist Islamic politicians in other provinces to be a threat – is not happening in Aceh. While Protestants make up the largest group of

non-Muslims in Aceh, they represent a declining proportion of the population. This decline has been rapidly accelerated since 1995 mainly because of deteriorating security conditions in Aceh. Many non-Muslims – who are mainly wealthy ethnic Chinese – have emigrated from Aceh. The security problem is more severe than during the pre-DOM troubles. In comparison, the same Graph also shows that in 1980-1981 there was a shift of the proportion of the non-Muslim constituency. The number of Protestants surged while that of Bhuddists declined sharply because in 1980 there was a major anti-Chinese riot all throughout Aceh. During this time, many Chinese converted from Bhuddism to Christianity. Apparently at the time the ethnic Chinese minority felt it was “safer” to be a member of a religion that belonged to the Muslim category of “people of the book.” Basically, rather than fleeing as they did in the late 1990s, non-Muslim minorities preferred to stay to address local discontent. Their behaviour is not indicative of religious tolerance. The salient political issue for the Acehnese is whether leadership – be it in government, industrial projects or other organisations – falls to a *putra daerah* (a local male Acehnese) or to an *orang pusat* (a non-Acehnese person picked by the central government). This overrides considerations of religion. There have been anti-Chinese riots in the recent past, which reflect economic jealousy expressed in racial terms. In one of the 1980-1981 riots, I have seen slogans like “*Ganyang Cina*” (destroy Chinese) with no anti-Christian or anti-Bhuddist rhetoric expressed in public. The basis for this seeming absence of inter-religious conflict is that in a region with a Muslim majority population the rights of non-Muslims must always be protected since it was ordered by the Prophet and codified in the Medina Charter. Up until President Wahid’s

government, this argument was repeated in public discourse in Aceh every time a social disturbance occurred. There is, however, no explicit mention of different ethnicity in the Charter. This is one reason why the tensions in Aceh have always taken the form of ethnic differences rather than religious differences. This contrasts with other regions in Indonesia where Muslims are not the dominant population. In recent conflicts – such as the 1998 May riots in Jakarta, the violent clashes in Ambon, Kupang and Poso in Eastern Indonesia – which seemingly appear to be inter-religious clashes, regardless of the varying socio-economic (and political) reasons behind them, the principal rhetoric repeated in public seems to be the defence of Islam against non-Muslims, and some are even prepared to employ violence to guarantee “Muslim survival.”

In another paper<sup>8</sup> I argue that it is the central government that seemed intent to perpetuate the stereotype of an “Islamic fundamentalist Aceh” (Amir, 2002). The reasons the government wanted to maintain this image is to conduct a reverse-Othering practice by portraying the Acehnese as “religious hardliners who won’t listen to reason,” hence anti-modernity and anti-development. This reverse-Othering process requires a brief explanation.

## 1.5. Reverse-Othering

Many genealogists of postcolonial thought credit Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as the founding work for the field. By his definition, the Othering

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<sup>8</sup> Originally presented as a paper in ASAA conference, 2000, the paper is also published in 2002, titled “The Religious Acehnese: A Factual or Imagined Community?”, in the volume *Beyond Jakarta* (Sakai, Minako, ed., published by Crawford, London).

process is the creation of a fantastical, material-discursive construct that shapes the real and imagined existences of those subjected to the fantasy. The process discussed by Said underlies the creation of identities such as the West/East, man/woman, Java/outer islands and central government/regional provinces. Said argued that the strength of Othering arises from the ability to elide difference with weakness. The case of Aceh demonstrates that Orientalism is a tool of post-colonial states in relation to their citizens, as much as it was a tool of European colonialism.

As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge. (Said, 1978:204-206).

To become "interpellated" by this ideology, to use Said's term, was to absorb these elements into oneself. In Indonesia, from Dutch rule through the modern *Reformasi* era, the fear of Other civilisations – both within and without the Republic – have always existed. Voiced anxieties over Dutch colonialism, American imperialism during the Old Order era, the "communist threat" bogeyman of the New Order era, the IMF during the reform era, and Muslim radicalism in the Post September 11 times were examples of the expressions of the neurotic insecurity and angst that defines the central government's self-perception. This sense of insecurity always required externalisation. In the case of insecurities over national unity, it was answered by the demonisation of the outer provinces. These "Others" were not merely different, but inherently opposed to, and indeed inimical to, the "civilised Jakarta." The only defence was aggressive, first-strike capacity: the destruction of the Other or their reformation and co-



option within the body of all that were “*daerah*” (regional) into a single national identity.

In Muslim identity politics, the irreconcilable political disputes within Muslim communities often resulted in Othering processes as well. Ideally, identity politics among Muslims are expressly forbidden.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, identity politics has always been a part of politics in Islam. It is easy to use the process when facing leadership challenges from a non-Muslim. Simply being a non-Muslim is reason enough to be considered unsuitable to lead Muslims. Some traditional interpretations of Islamic texts decree that Muslims should never accept the authority of non-Muslims or of women. The practice is more awkward when facing a fellow Muslim. The regular Othering practice in Muslim politics is aimed to demonstrate that the opponent is “not a good Muslim,” and therefore he loses the claim to leadership. In this context, the government and GAM claimed each other to be bad Muslims. Ulama accused LSMs of being bad Muslims for taking money from foreign governments. LSMs accused Ulama of being uncaring and indifferent to the sufferings of the people, thus making them bad Muslim leaders. In short, currently everybody engages in this Othering practice.

Reverse-Othering is the opposite of the Othering process described above. In reverse-Othering, it is not difference that is viewed as a source of weakness. Rather, it is the discursive construct of a particular exponent of shared values as “extremists” and therefore threatening. In Indonesia,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the *Al-Humazah* (*surah* or chapter 104) of the Qur’an spoke against slanderer and backbiter. There are also *hadith* (the Prophet’s sayings) addressing the same issue.

aside from regionalism, it is religion that is often viewed as a threat to national unity and in Aceh it is specifically Islam. Thus, much like the Orientalists of the West, the government declares the Acehnese as "fundamentalists" and therefore backward. As such, it falls upon the "more enlightened" Muslims – in this case the Indonesian central government – to take custody of resources and take care of important decision making in the modern world. Perpetuating an image of the Acehnese as fundamentalists justifies their marginalisation in any decision-making. But at the same time a unified group of Ulama as formal representatives of the Acehnese will also serve as an excellent means to carry out top-down government policies without the hassles of democratic debates.

Any problem in Aceh is equated with a religious problem, hence religious authorities like the Ulama are officially considered to be the ones to assert control. In the *Reformasi* (Reform) period, the government has employed the Islamic State ideal in arguing that only Islamic *Syariah* law can solve the complex problems of Aceh. This argument has been building since the Habibie administration and was recently finalised by the Megawati Sukarnoputri administration. This view is fully supported by the military since the concentration of authority in the hands of the Ulama makes it seem easier to handle dissent.<sup>10</sup>

Aceh is distinct from other provinces in that it suffered from this reverse-Othering process conducted by the central government to

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<sup>10</sup> For example, implicit propaganda employed by central government officials is that Muslims (GAM) should not have conducted acts of violence against other Muslims (the military). To do so demonstrates that they are "un-Islamic."

disempower the population from any significant effort of self-determination. The status of *Daerah Istimewa* (special region) bestowed on Aceh serves as an excuse for the central government to neglect the political and economic development of the province (Yeoh, 1994:118-119). There is a visible effort to paint the Acehnese as Muslim radicals, at least strong Muslims (*Islamnya kuat*). Although on a rhetorical level most Muslims admire the supposedly "different" level of piety displayed by these so-called strong Muslims, in practice they treat such a position as impractical idealism. This ambiguity is similar to how the ideals of socialism are treated in Western countries. They are admired yet at the same time avoided.

In a state like Indonesia, the separation of religion from politics imposed throughout its provinces including Aceh – combined with the Dutch colonial legacy of government policy in pitting the Uleebalang against the Ulama (Yeoh, 1994:88) – has left the Ulama with virtually little real say in important public administration. Their mediatory role in settling disputes has been contested by state courts, and even their authority over marriage arrangements has been contested by the 1974 marriage law.<sup>11</sup> Their role in society has been restricted to education, religious ceremonies, and campaigning during elections. A prominent Ulama complained in one of the meetings I attended in Aceh that:

The Ulama are currently like old tractors. You take them out only when you need them. Everyday they just sit in the shed to rot.

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<sup>11</sup> The 1974 marriage law was imposed by New Order government to regulate marriages and divorces. It is aimed to standardise marriages and divorces throughout the culturally diverse Indonesia. Rather than religious or traditional leaders, it is the state official that can perform marriage ceremonies or officiate divorces.

Since DOM was lifted, the Acehnese elite have distanced themselves from further use of Islamic symbolism in politics. The proposal to implement *Syariah* law in Aceh in mid-October 2000 came under attack by various groups in Aceh. Students and NGOs were mainly concerned at its potential to be used to justify oppressive practices by the government. GAM was worried that religion is currently used to sideline their demands where – unless its members have religious leadership claims – they will end up being ignored by an Indonesian government which prefers to negotiate with non-GAM groups like the Ulama. (Amir, 2002). The Ulama are concerned that their decreasing authority will further be taken over by government bureaucracy, or worse still, overtaken by *Ulama pusat* (Ulama who are funded by the central government).

## 1.6. Recent Political Development

The end of the repressive regime of Suharto has allowed greater freedom throughout Indonesia. This in turn has sparked more open demands for greater autonomy or even local independence. Indonesian elites fear that successful autonomy movements within the nation will lead to the creation of more such movements in the archipelago. The change in government has allowed human rights workers to uncover evidence of the long-suspected human rights abuses committed by the military during the New Order. While current political leaders seem interested in ending this painful legacy, the military establishment has thus far continued to deny its involvement and resist changing its policies in Aceh. As long as this denial continues, the Acehnese problems will remain. Coating them with religious

rhetoric will not resolve the Acehnese demand for correcting past injustices.

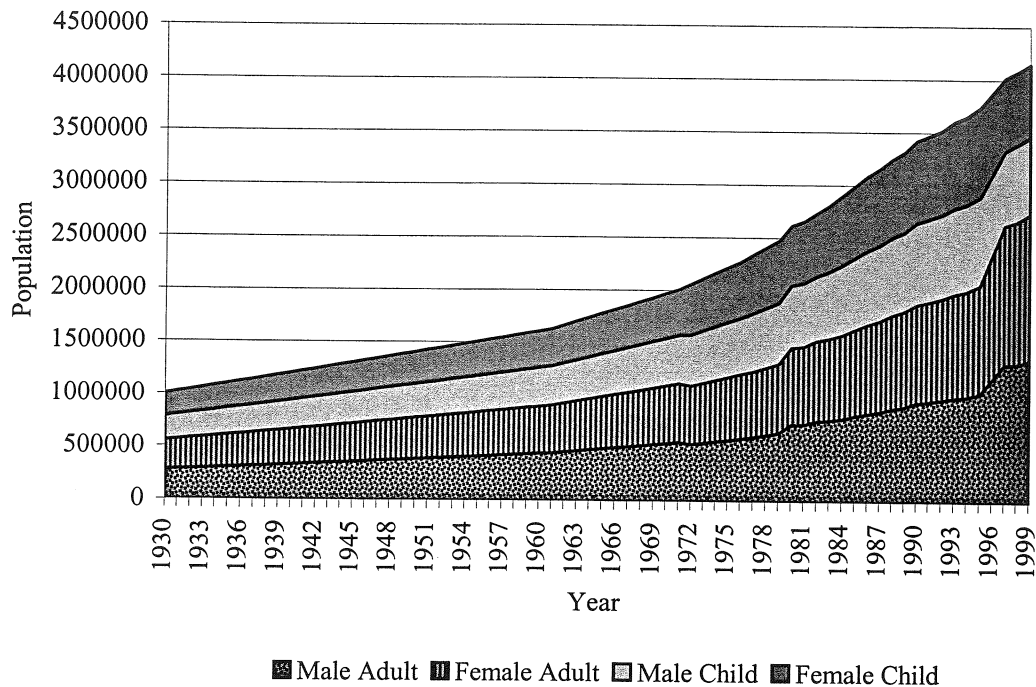
Aceh today is vastly different from the one at the time of Uleebalang and Ulama rule. The population has boomed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Averaging at 2.65%, the annual population growth rate in Aceh has fluctuated between 1.38% to 5.67%. The highest growth rate was in 1980 during the start of the oil boom in North Aceh. At the time, a large influx of immigrant workers were brought in to build the oil and gas refineries of Arun in Lhokseumawe. This was a significant cause of resentment among Acehnese who, in addition to feeling left out of the economic development project, also felt colonised all over again by what is largely perceived as a Javanese government.

Table 1.2.  
Growth in the Population of Aceh

| Year | Total   | Population<br>Growth | Year | Total   | Population<br>Growth | Year | Total   | Population<br>Growth |
|------|---------|----------------------|------|---------|----------------------|------|---------|----------------------|
| 1930 | 1003062 |                      | 1982 | 2737290 | 2.93%                | 1991 | 3469770 | 1.38%                |
| 1961 | 1628983 |                      | 1983 | 2806490 | 2.53%                | 1992 | 3519522 | 1.43%                |
| 1971 | 2008749 |                      | 1984 | 2901314 | 3.38%                | 1993 | 3604758 | 2.42%                |
| 1976 | 2272814 |                      | 1985 | 2992201 | 3.13%                | 1994 | 3657078 | 1.45%                |
| 1977 | 2340608 | 2.98%                | 1986 | 3087368 | 3.18%                | 1995 | 3741205 | 2.30%                |
| 1978 | 2407935 | 2.88%                | 1987 | 3158003 | 2.29%                | 1996 | 3878753 | 3.68%                |
| 1979 | 2475262 | 2.80%                | 1988 | 3245346 | 2.77%                | 1997 | 4016300 | 3.55%                |
| 1980 | 2615583 | 5.67%                | 1989 | 3318092 | 2.24%                | 1998 | 4074900 | 1.46%                |
| 1981 | 2659443 | 1.68%                | 1990 | 3422693 | 3.15%                | 1999 | 4144500 | 1.71%                |

Source: Compiled from BPS data

Graph 1.2.  
Population Growth in Aceh

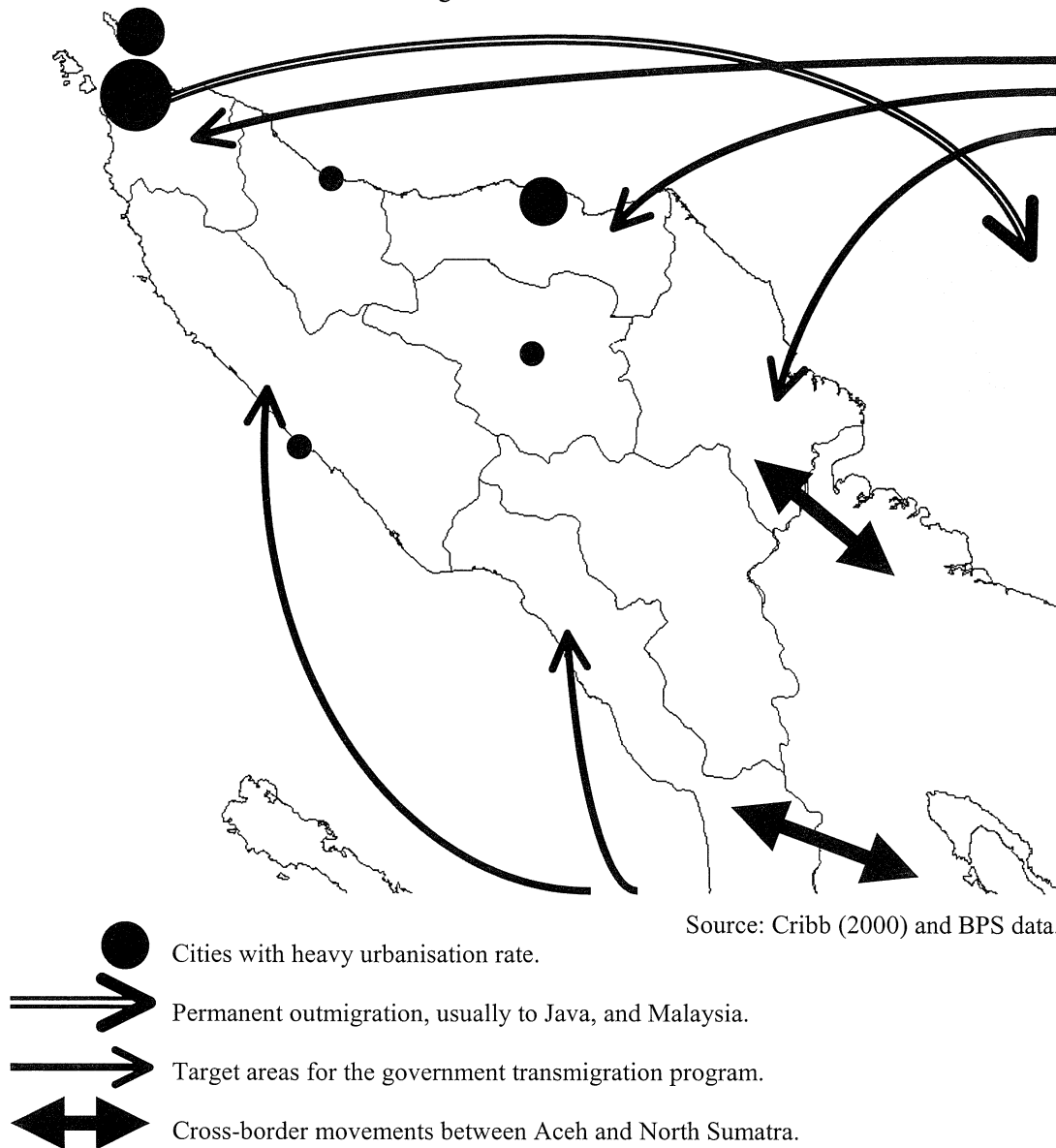


Note: Adults are those legally over 17 years of age

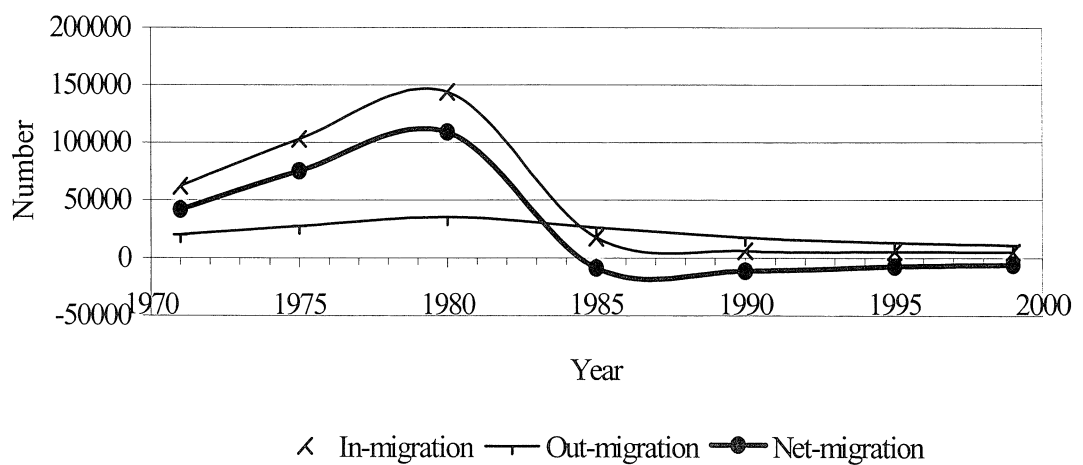
Source: Compiled from BPS data

The number of Acehneses born outside of Aceh is extremely small with an annual percentage well below 0.5%. Transmigration sponsored by the government is low compared to other provinces. The rate is between 1000-2000 persons per year peaking in 1975 (54512 persons). Permanent outmigration that is officially registered has recently decreased. This includes outmigration into neighbouring countries. The number decreased from around 20,000 (1970s) to 10,000 (late 1990s). However, since Acehneses have long been travelling across the border with North Sumatra, the official numbers are unreliable.

Map 1.1.  
Migration Pattern in Aceh

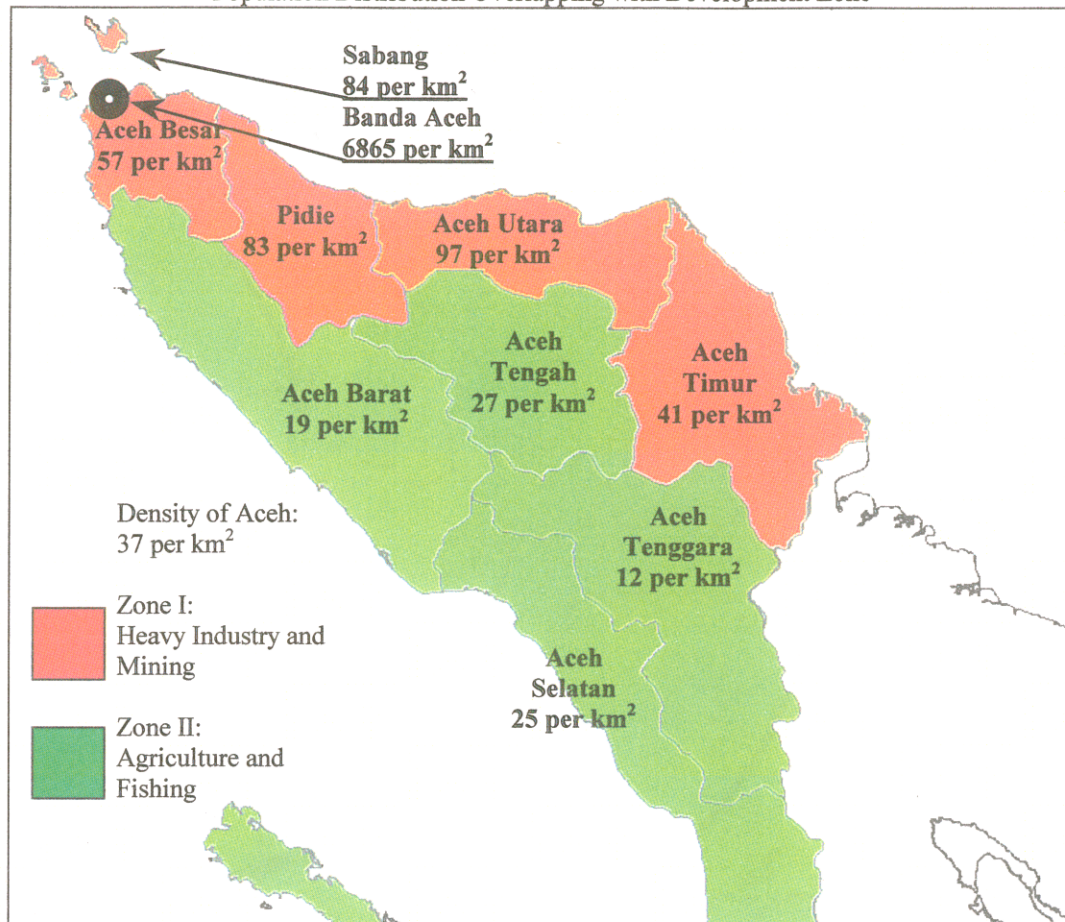


Graph 1.3.  
Migration in Aceh



Source: Compiled from BPS data

Map 1.2.  
Population Distribution Overlapping with Development Zone



Source: Compiled from BPS data

There are some unintended consequences of the prolonged conflict in Aceh. First, the reason that permanent outmigration of Acehnese seems to have declined is that most Acehnese who regularly crossed the border in and out of Aceh preferred to settle in other parts of Indonesia as well as other countries. Despite their history as a cosmopolitan region, Acehnese in general – with the exception of Acehnese from the small district of Pidie (described by Siegel, 1969) who travelled to Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Thailand – are relative newcomers (compared to the Minangkabau, the Bataks or the Bugis) when it comes to the practice of *merantau* (seeking fortune abroad). Acehnese trade used to rely simply on its ports and geographical location. Because conducting business in Aceh has become



less profitable as well as dangerous,<sup>12</sup> entrepreneurial Acehnese who used to travel in and out of the area have been forced to conduct their business outside the province permanently. These Acehnese have gone as far as Java, Australia, Europe and the United States. From my brief research on Acehnese expatriates in Java and Sydney, there is a strong indication that the Acehnese community in these locations has actually doubled since the end of DOM.<sup>13</sup> At this current rate of outward migration, younger Acehnese are further encouraged to join the global job market. Indeed, Acehnese have managed to form viable communities abroad and have provided extra economic support that no longer relies on their traditional lands.

The second consequence of the conflict is that it has led to a partial vacuum in the male dominated political scene, which has been filled by more Acehnese women. Despite their increasing contribution to the economy, Acehnese women remain underrepresented in politics. Major policy making positions have always been exclusively male despite the projected image of the Acehnese female warrior, as the following chapters will show.

The third consequence of the conflict is that it has left behind people who are already disadvantaged in the modern economy. Middle and upper-class Acehnese had been travelling out of Aceh long before DOM, mostly to Singapore, Malaysia, North Sumatra and Jakarta. Since DOM, they prefer to stay permanently abroad to avoid the violence. Because of this

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<sup>12</sup> This is mainly due to security problems and the huge amount of money required to pay off the military and GAM (discussions with Lesley McCulloch, University of Tasmania, a specialist on military business ventures in Aceh).

<sup>13</sup> For example, in 1999 there were at least 150 Acehnese living in Sydney. In early 2001 their number was estimated at around 300 (Source: interview).

tendency, Aceh is having difficulty in maintaining economic growth due to capital flight. There are few outside investors and the heavy industry activities are constantly disrupted. This in turn hurts low-scale support trade activities surrounding the industry areas. Huge bribes are required to pay off both sides of the conflict. In short, Aceh is no longer viable in its economic activities and this is forcing people to leave the province.

# Chapter 2: THE IMAGES OF ACHINESE WOMEN





## **Chapter Two:**

# **THE IMAGES OF ACEHNESE WOMEN**

This chapter begins with an analysis of the representation of women in Acehnese political discourse. It will examine how practices of exaggeration and underestimation are applied in presenting Acehnese women. It will also describe how Acehnese women perceive these images.

Image construction is an important element in any political struggle as it forms the context favourable to the presentation of views and policies which will garner popular support. When a portrayal or act of image construction is successful, it will evoke reactions from audiences in the form of ideas, beliefs, emotions, fears and desires. Image construction is intended to enhance or diminish the person or recipient of the image construction. The portrayals or acts of image construction in stories typically affect the opinions of audiences that in turn have the power to affect a recipient's fate. The acts of image construction play an important role in social interaction because members of society have, and share, emotionally-laden ideas that are part of their minds or personalities, about what is valued, devalued or negatively valued. Typically, these ideas are encoded as binary oppositions: moral/immoral; beautiful/ugly, competent/incompetent; important/unimportant; relevant/irrelevant; desirable/undesirable; kind/cruel, and so on.

The Italian political thinker, Norberto Bobbio, declared that binary oppositions will always be relevant in politics because the nature of politics itself is adversarial (Bobbio, 1996). These categories are binary because

the essence of politics is the struggle between oppositional views and policies. Nobody questions the two categories if the two sides appear to be of equal strength. However, once one side becomes far stronger than the other, then both sides will question those categories. The stronger side will give a final "there is no other way" argument while the weaker side will appropriate some of the opposition's views and call them their own.

Similarly, out of Bobbio's proposition, I perceive that there are two types of image construction that function within any political system: exaggeration or underestimation of the Other. Both serve well in any oppositional relationship. A "neutral" construction – if such a thing is possible at all – has no political function since it undermines the purpose of image presentation itself.

The foremost image of Acehnese women in Indonesia is the women rulers and warriors. History textbooks in schools all over Indonesia always describe accounts of the "heroic Acehnese women" to the point of overrepresenting the women of the region within a nationalist Indonesian context. Prominent women featured in these texts from outside of Aceh are the Javanese women's rights activist, R.A. Kartini, and the female warrior of Maluku, Martha Christina Tiyahahu. The former died of disease, the latter died hanged by the Dutch colonials. In contrast, Acehnese women who fought against colonialism are presented as either died in battle or in exile. Few people openly comment that although the known history of Aceh is filled with stories of women fighters and activists, their history has only known six female political leaders, a relatively small number in a long line of male political rulers.

Table 2.1.  
Some historical rulers and women warriors in Aceh history

| Name                                 | Role                | Historical Details                    |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Nur Ilah*                            | Queen               | Died c1380                            |
| Nahrasiyah*                          | Queen               | Died c1428                            |
| Ali Mughayat Syah                    | Sultan              | Crowned 1496                          |
| Salahuddin ibn Ali                   | Sultan              | Crowned 1528                          |
| Ala'ad-din al Kahar ibn Ali          | Sultan              | Crowned 1537                          |
| Ali Riayat Syah (Husain)             | Sultan              | Crowned 1568                          |
| Sultan Muda                          | Sultan              | Crowned 1575                          |
| Sri Alam                             | Sultan              | Crowned 1575                          |
| Zainal Abidin                        | Sultan              | Crowned 1576                          |
| Ala'ad-din Mansyur Syah              | Sultan              | Crowned 1577                          |
| Ali Riayat Syah (Sultan Boyong)      | Sultan              | Crowned c1589                         |
| Ala'ad-din Riayat Syah               | Sultan              | Crowned 1596                          |
| Ali Riayat Syah                      | Sultan              | Crowned 1604                          |
| Keumalahayati*                       | Admiral             | mid-1500 to early 1600s               |
| Iskandar Muda                        | Sultan              | Crowned 1607                          |
| Iskandar Thani                       | Sultan              | Crowned 1636                          |
| Safiatuddin Syah*                    | Sultanah            | Crowned 1641                          |
| Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin*              | Sultanah            | Crowned 1675                          |
| Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah*             | Queen               | Crowned 1678                          |
| Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah*            | Queen               | Crowned 1688                          |
| Badrul Alam Syarif Hasyim Jamaluddin | Sultan              | Crowned 1699                          |
| Perkasa Alam Syarif Lamtui           | Sultan              | Crowned 1702                          |
| Jamal al-Alam Badr al-Munir          | Sultan              | Crowned 1703                          |
| Jauhar al-Alam Aminuddin             | Sultan              | Crowned 1726                          |
| Shams al-Alam                        | Sultan              | Crowned 1726                          |
| Ala'ad-din Ahmad Syah                | Sultan              | Crowned 1727                          |
| Ala'ad-din Jehan Syah                | Sultan              | Crowned 1735                          |
| Mahmud Syah                          | Sultan              | Crowned 1760 (restored 1765 and 1773) |
| Badr ad-Din Juhan Syah               | Sultan              | Crowned 1764                          |
| Sulaiman Syah (Udana Lela)           | Sultan              | Crowned 1773                          |
| Ala'ad-din Muhammed Syah             | Sultan              | Crowned 1781                          |
| Ala'ad-din Jauhar al-Alam Syah       | Regent              | Appointed 1795                        |
| Teungku Syed Hussein Aideed          | Sultan              | Crowned 1815                          |
| Syarif Saif al-Alam Syah             | Sultan              | Crowned 1815                          |
| Ala'ad-din Jauhar al-Alam Syah       | Sultan              | Crowned 1819                          |
| Ala'ad-din Muhammad Daud Syah        | Sultan              | Crowned 1823                          |
| Cut Nyak Dhien*                      | Aristocrat, warrior | 1848-1908                             |
| Cut Nyak Meutia*                     | Aristocrat, warrior | 1870-1910                             |
| Pocut Baren*                         | Aristocrat, warrior | Died 1933                             |
| Pocut Meurah Intan*                  | Aristocrat, warrior | Died 1937                             |

Note: \*Women rulers or warriors

Source: Reid (1969) and Hing (1995).

The following section will describe the pattern of their ascension to power. It will also describe the pattern of their replacement (either constitutional or abrupt) by conservative and/or religious right leadership.

## 2.1. The Queens

For most of its history, Aceh has been ruled by men. The kingdoms of Aceh (Samudra Pasai, Peureulak, and the Aceh Sultanate) consisted of a loose coalition of port-cities and surrounding areas governed by Uleebalangs. These rudimentary federations after the introduction of Islam took the form of Islamic Sultanates, which consolidated overall leadership in the Sultan with religious authority exercised through the Ulama and the Mufti (the supreme Ulama). Siegel (1969) discussed the status and role of the three classes. Politically, the Sultan's rule depended on how he managed his relationship with his regional vassals – the nobility or the Uleebalang – who controlled the daily economic activities. However, the Sultan was the supreme guardian of culture and tradition, a status and role that the Uleebalang could never achieve. Both Sultan and Uleebalang positions are inherited through male lineages. The position of Ulama, however, was obtained through learning and travel, because the position was intended to unify the people. There were virtually no female religious leaders. The only times when women were able to assume the Sultan or Uleebalang position were when there was no direct male heir and the noble houses contending for the position were too evenly matched. Hence, women rulers in these kingdoms was the result of a compromise when there was no male option available.

The first known female ruler of Aceh was Queen Nur Ilah (died c1380) who ruled over the kingdom of Pasai and Kedah. Her ascent occurred at a period of transition. At the time, Pasai and Kedah were one of the many kingdoms that were subjugated by the ancient Javanese Hindu-



kingdom of Majapahit (Ras, 1968). Male candidates for political leadership as a Majapahit vassal were plentiful, but none were chosen by high ranking officials of Majapahit. Queen Nur Ilah was appointed to rule as a vassal because she was considered the most trustworthy (because a woman is deemed less likely to rebel) member of the royal family of Pasai (Said, 1981:105-106). It would seem that her rule occurred in one of the transitional periods in Aceh history when its regional political power was in decline due to the rise of Majapahit.

The second known female ruler of Aceh was Queen Nahrasiyah (died c1428). There is not much known about her except that she governed the kingdom of Pasai along with her second husband, Salahuddin. In the ancient Chinese history book, *Ying-Yai Sheng-lan*, it is reported that her first husband died in a battle and she vowed to wed (and later did) the person who avenged his death (Alfian, 1994:18). Since Salahuddin was not a high-ranking member of the aristocracy, he could not rule as king so she ruled, replacing her dead first husband. Her son from her first husband was too young to rule, thus there was no male in the immediate royal family who was able to rule. It is important to note that after the crown prince grew into adulthood, he conspired with the noblemen and murdered his stepfather, Salahuddin, before taking over the throne. Although it is difficult to confirm this account, the circumstance of her rule and the following return to male rule fits neatly into the scenario where no suitable male heirs were available to replace a ruler who died suddenly.

The Acehnese kingdom of Samudra Pasai is widely regarded to have reached its zenith during the rule of Sultan Iskandar Muda. The popular Hadih Maja described his rule as thus:

|                                  |                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Adat bak Poteu Meureuhom,</i> | Customary traditions according to Poteu Meureuhom (the Sultan's advisor in cultural matters),                           |
| <i>hukom bak Syiah Kuala.</i>    | The law according to the Syeikh Abdurrauf Syiah Kuala (the Sultan's chief Ulama).                                       |
| <i>Kanun bak Putroe Phang,</i>   | Representation according to "the Pahang Princess" (the Sultan's queen who was also his chief advisor in legal matters), |
| <i>reusam Bak Laksamana.</i>     | Protocols according to the Laksamana (the head of the military who often also undertook diplomatic duties).             |
| <i>Hukom ngon adat,</i>          | [Islamic] law and customary tradition,                                                                                  |
| <i>lagee zat ngon sifeut.</i>    | is like substance and its attributes.                                                                                   |

(Hasjmy, 1996:18)

Putroe Phang was a Malay princess who became influential in Sultan Iskandar Muda's court. Taken as a trophy during a raid in the conquest of the Kingdom of Pahang in coastal Malay, she was wed by the Sultan and became his queen. She advised him in matters of daily governance, yet remained marked as an outsider. Her influence, though important, is considered supportive and has never been repeated in Acehnese history.

Queen Nahrasiyah's scenario was repeated with the rule of the third known female ruler of Aceh, the Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah (died 1675). She was the first in line of four Sultanahs who ruled Aceh consecutively for almost 60 years (1641-1699). Sultan Iskandar Muda died without leaving a male heir. He was replaced by his son-in-law – Sultan Iskandar Thani – who died after ruling for five years. Safiatuddin Syah's ascent was strongly opposed by factions in the court who insisted that a woman could not be appointed as head of a kingdom since it would contravene Islamic law (as interpreted by them).

In Islamic Law, never mind being a king, to become an *Imam* [person who conduct prayer services] or a *Wali Am* [a relative legally responsible for the bride] a woman is not allowed. (Zainuddin, 1961:100)

Only after the intervention of a prominent religious leader – Syeikh Abdurrauf of Singkel who argued that political affairs should be kept separate from religious affairs – Safiatuddin Syah was crowned as Sultanah. Another reason to accept her coronation was that the previous two rulers – Sultan Iskandar Muda and Sultan Iskandar Thani – were both tyrants who ruled the elite of the time very harshly. By supporting a female ruler, the elite expected the role of the Sultanah to be that of a mediator or referee, which is a valuable asset for a kingdom whose economy at the time depended heavily on international trade and diplomacy (Reid, 1988: 641). It also turned out that Safiatuddin Syah's reign was a part of the decline of Samudra Pasai after Iskandar Muda. She witnessed a failed *coup d'etat* attempt, separatism in the regions of Pahang, Johor and Patani, as well as the rising influence of Dutch colonialism (Sofyan, 1994:43-58).

When Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah died, she was replaced again with another woman, Sultanah Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin (died 1678), daughter of a high ranking nobleman with a strong link (see figure 2.1.) to Sultanah Safiatuddin. She did not rule for long since she died two years after her coronation. She was replaced by Queen Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah (died 1688). This fifth female ruler of Aceh was already in her mid-30s when she was crowned. Her origins are unclear. Historical sources debated whether she was Sultanah Safiatuddin's stepdaughter or her sister. Still there was no strong consensus on a male ruler. The court was still unable to find a

suitable male royal to become king. These circumstances suggested that Zakiatuddin was "a spare" to her predecessor.

The debate over whether a woman should be allowed to rule remained. Factions against the queen – despite being held in check by the Queen's supporters – maintained their positions and contributed to the lack of political unity required to govern during troubled times. The ascent of women to the throne was made possible due to the influence of a very moderate Mufti named Syeh Nurudin ar-Raniry as well as Sufi Ulama like Syaikh Abdurrauf of Singkel (also known as Teungku Syiah Kuala) who oversaw the reign of the three Sultanahs. The Sultanahs' rule was strengthened by the support of the Sufi Ulama, but came at a price. The rival Islamic orders (led by the Ulama Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin as-Samatrani) were banished by royal decree.

The debate over female rule finally culminated at the time of the sixth and last female ruler of Aceh, Queen Kamalat Syah (died 1700). She ruled for a decade and was the first female ruler who abdicated from her throne due to political pressure. By this time Syeh Nurudin ar-Raniry and Syaikh Abdurrauf were already dead, weakening the Ulama who supported the throne. Rival royalties grew stronger and they too had Ulama support. Her weak political position was evident early in her reign when she conceded to both the French Trading Company and the East India Company the right to open offices in Aceh in 1695. At the same time, her opponents strengthened their claim over the throne by bringing in the outside opinion of a religious authority from Mecca.

[The] group of religious leaders did not stay passive, instead they strengthened their position by showing a letter from a *Qadhi Malikal Adil* in Mecca notifying all chiefs and people of Aceh that the appointment of a woman as a supreme authority was against Islamic rules. This strategy was effective. Kamalat Syah abdicated and the government was handed over to Badrul Alam Syarif Hasyim Jamaluddin. Following this, the control of the Aceh government never again fell into the hands of a woman. (Veth in Sufi and Ismail, 1994:72-73)

Her death – mere months after her abdication – allowed for the consolidation of power for her successor, the Sultan Badrul Alam Syarif Hasyim Jamaluddin, a man of Arab descent. Although women kept a prominent place in Aceh's history, never again did they hold another position of supreme political leadership.

## 2.2. The Warriors

Contemporary Indonesian historians have always praised the role of Acehnese women in the armed struggle against European colonialism. They were represented as fierce warriors who went into the thick of battle. Numerically, however, they were outnumbered by men. Leadership during wartime in Aceh remains (or is presented in the history books to be) dominated by "devout Muslim men."

The first known Acehnese female warrior was Admiral Keumalahayati. Little was known about her aside from her background. She was the great-grand daughter of Sultan Salahuddin Syah (1530-1539). Both her father Mahmud Syah and grandfather were Admirals as well. Her husband died fighting the Portuguese. At her request, she became head of

the women's navy – the *Inong Balee* armada – which consisted of widows whose husbands had died in struggles against the Portuguese. The ruler of the time – Sultan Al Mukkamil – was impressed and appointed her as Admiral of the navy. During her career, she conducted raids on Portuguese and Dutch ships, and helped establish Aceh's dominance of the Malacca Straits. One important thing to point out is that the main political reason the Sultan appointed her is that he did not trust men and she was seen to be trustworthy.<sup>14</sup> It is also worth noting that at the time, the Sultan also appointed another woman to a top military position: Cut Limpah was the head of the royal secret service during his reign (Van Zeggelen in Sufi, 1994:31). The rise of these women was exceptional rather than common practice.<sup>15</sup>

The most famous Acehnese female warrior was Cut Nyak Dhien (1848-1908) who was immortalised in Eros Djarot's 1984 film of her struggle. As with the fate of most nationalist icons, very few representations are critical enough about the background and circumstances of her role. She was a member of the Acehnese privileged elite, at the time the aristocratic Uleebalang (district chief). Her father was an Uleebalang, her mother was of noble descent, she enjoyed religious education (education was a rarity for women at the time<sup>16</sup>), and her first husband – Teuku Ibrahim of Tungkop – was also an Uleebalang. When he died in the war against the

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<sup>14</sup> This was described by British and Dutch Orientalists at the time, such as J. Davis and Julius Jacobs (see works by historian Rusdi Sufi, 1994:30-31).

<sup>15</sup> Of course this assessment is also provisional considering the fact that the historical sources available cited in this section are all written by men (e.g. Alfian, Sufi, Van Zeggelen, Zentgraaf, Iskandar, Said, etc). This selection serves to demonstrate the dominance of male voice in drawing generalisations for the representation of past Acehnese women.

<sup>16</sup> For changes of male-female clientele in the Acehnese education system through history, see Leigh (1992:216).

Dutch in 1878, Cut Nyak Dhien was already a displaced person who was forced to flee her home. Her second marriage to another Uleebalang – the famous colonial fighter Teuku Umar – in 1878 occurred mere months after her widowhood. Though some historians have praised (e.g. Zainuddin, 1966; Sufi, 1994b), even romanticised (e.g. Hazil, 1951; Szkely, 1951) the circumstances of her second marriage, it was also considered widely by Acehnese historians (e.g. Hazil, 1951; Said, 1981; Alfian, 1994; Sufi, 1994b) as a politically convenient marriage in the struggle against the Dutch since the two people belonged to two influential houses in Aceh. Despite the heroic and religious undertone of the circumstances of the marriage, being widowed at the relatively early age of 30 was considered a bad omen in a society that stigmatised widows.<sup>17</sup> Her heroism initially did not extend to challenging the traditional gender role. She remained at home to maintain her husband's household. Only after his death in 1899 Cut Nyak Dhien took up arms to continue the fight. A twice-widowed woman in Aceh at the time can only have one option: to die as a martyr in combat against the *kaphé* (infidel) Dutch, or to live in social exclusion. Much to her dismay, her eventual fate was exile. Betrayed by her male right-hand lieutenant – Pang Laot Ali – she was captured in 1905 and was exiled to Sumedang, West Java. She died there in 1908.

Pocut Meurah Intan (died 1937) was another Acehnese female fighter who came from a privileged background. Her father was a descendant of one of the Sultans of Aceh. Her husband was also of noble

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<sup>17</sup> This belief is still held true in most rural areas of Aceh (see Hurgronje, 1906b; and Siapno, 1997).

background. Together, they fought against the Dutch. When he was captured, she continued the fight with her three sons. She was captured in 1904 and was exiled to Blora, Java, where she died in 1937.

Another Acehnese female warrior and an aristocrat, was Cut Nyak Meutia (1870-1910). Her father was an Uleebalang. She enjoyed formal religious education, which is a privilege reserved for *some* elite women. The majority of women in Aceh at that time were illiterate. She was married to an Uleebalang. Her family held strong anti-Dutch views and when her husband sided with the Dutch, she divorced him (Zentgraaf, 1982:147). She then married another Uleebalang; this time he was an anti-Dutch fighter (Iskandar, 1965:18-37). Together, they fought battles against the Dutch until their surrender in 1903. Her second husband was executed by the Dutch in 1905 on charges of treason and Cut Nyak Meutia married her third husband (one of her second husband's lieutenants) and resumed the fight. When he also died in 1910, she continued to fight against the Dutch until she was killed a month later. Her marriage to the third husband was one of the last wishes of her second husband prior to his execution (the first being to continue the fight, the second was to raise their son as a fighter). It is also worth mentioning that all historical accounts of this woman warrior always mention her beautiful appearance (Sulaiman, 1994a:106; Zentgraaf, 1982:144-147). These writers are of the opinion that she had many suitors in her teens with no need for the conventional arranged marriage.

By far the most interesting Acehnese female warrior is Pocut Baren (died 1933). Her early life followed a similar pattern to the three women already discussed. She was related to men of noble lineage (her father was



an Uleebalang) and was married to an Uleebalang. She was born and brought up in times of war. Like other female fighters, she took up the mantle of leadership when her husband died in battle. She suffered grave injury to her leg (later amputated by Dutch doctors) and was captured in 1910 (Zentgraaf, 1982:138). In accordance with the policy regarding dangerous war leaders at the time, the Military Governor of Aceh, Van Daalen, was about to send her into exile to Java. However, a Dutch liaison officer, T.J. Veltman, suggested that she should be returned to her native country instead to continue her career as a district chief. Van Daalen accepted the request and after she recovered, Pocut Baren was sent back to Tungkop and became its Uleebalang. Grateful for this decision, she successfully rebuilt the villages ravaged by war and succeeded in maintaining reasonable stability in the area. She was admired by her subjects and the Dutch alike. After she died, historians (Zentgraaf, 1982:142; Sulaiman, 1994) assessed her as a beloved – rather than an unpatriotic collaborator or traitor – leader of her people.<sup>18</sup>

The historical sources on these women were all written by men<sup>19</sup> including Acehnese writers. There have been women scholars who focused on Aceh but none have focused on female leadership.<sup>20</sup> The closest

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<sup>18</sup> Note that historical accounts of Teuku Umar – husband of Cut Nyak Dhien – who was a collaborator before turning against the Dutch also fail to paint his life with such negative assessment. It would seem that nationalist sentiments may have served to tone down depictions of such “embarrassing episodes.”

<sup>19</sup> Scholars such as Alfian, Hasjmy, Iskandar, Said, Siegel, Sofyan, Sufi, Van Zeggelen, Zentgraaf, etc. have never specifically focused on women politicians or warriors, but rather as an auxiliary addition to their major works. When they do focus on Aceh women in minor articles – such as Alfian (1994), Morris (1983), Sufi (1994a-c) or Hasjmy (1996) – they tend to present these “exceptional cases” with nationalist language.

<sup>20</sup> Major work on Aceh by Morris (1986) focused on economy and employment, while Leigh’s (1992) focused on education.

is Siapno (1997) who addressed the issue of male dominance in representing past images of Acehese women. However, the focus of her work is on forms of political resistance rather than mainstream politics. If anything, her study reinforced the conclusion that historically the political mainstream in Aceh has always been male.

## 2.3. The Constructs

The pattern we have seen so far is that Acehese women must fulfil several requirements in order to attain leadership roles. First, they must have an elite, socio-economic, and religious background. Second, they must follow the lead of a male figure (be it husband or father). But what of the women who lack either of these characteristics? Under "normal" conditions they would have less political power and in the case of Aceh every single decision-making institution is male-dominated. The case of the queens and Sultanahs are all exceptional and not the norm. Male rule – where ruling authority is transferred through the male line of descent – applied in the majority of the cases. For women the rule remains – as the cases of the female fighters have indicated – that kinship and marriage are important in establishing authority for a woman as well as to gain political alliances. Being related or married to a male leader is always important for a woman in staking a claim for leadership.

The post-DOM conflict in Aceh is proof that this practice still pertains. GAM, for example, cites its female wing – the *Inong Balee* division which took its name from Admiral Malahayati's all-widow fleet – as evidence that its struggle involves both of the sexes. However, not a single political or military leader within GAM is female. Despite the marching on parade of

these women (mainly for the foreign journalist's view) the role of this division is not combat but auxiliary support such as providing logistics and intelligence. In short, these women's roles are extensions of the female domestic roles much like the roles taken by women in the Indonesian revolution. These female military personnel must also project a certain image for their work. First, they must project a devout Muslim appearance and demeanor. Second, they must submit to the male dominated chain of command. Third, despite their true role, they must put on the appearance that they are well trained for combat. Despite its members' training in frontline combat, they never saw battle and have so far only been assigned to logistics (smuggling, bomb making, etc) and intelligence gathering by fraternising with Indonesian military personnel (*Kontras*, 2000b:5), for which they also receive public reprobation.

Photo 2.1.  
The Inong Balee Division of GAM



Sources:

Top left: "Young Muslim women training" (Koch, 1999)

Top right: "Widows - Victims From Rape By The Indonesian Army" (Atjeh Times, 2000). Please note that regardless of the title *chosen* by the media (often for propagandist use), to all intents and purposes women portrayed in reality may or may not be rape victims.

Middle left: "A woman fighter" (Gaouette, 1999)

Middle right: "Inong Balee praying" (Atjeh Times, 2000)

Bottom left: "Receiving The Sermon" (Atjeh Times, 2000)

Bottom right: "Prayer" (Time, 1999)

The photos above are the ones taken by journalists approved by GAM. These images have similar associations with those employed by the



government to portray the Acehese female rulers and fighters of the past.

The main difference is the portrayal of the weapon: the *rencong* blade instead of AK-47s. Compare the preceding images with the following official portrayals of the female fighters.

Photo 2.2.  
Paintings of Three Woman Fighters



Sources:

Top left: "Pocut Meurah Intan" (Rooseno, 1994)

Top right: "Cut Nyak Meutia" (Rooseno, 1994)

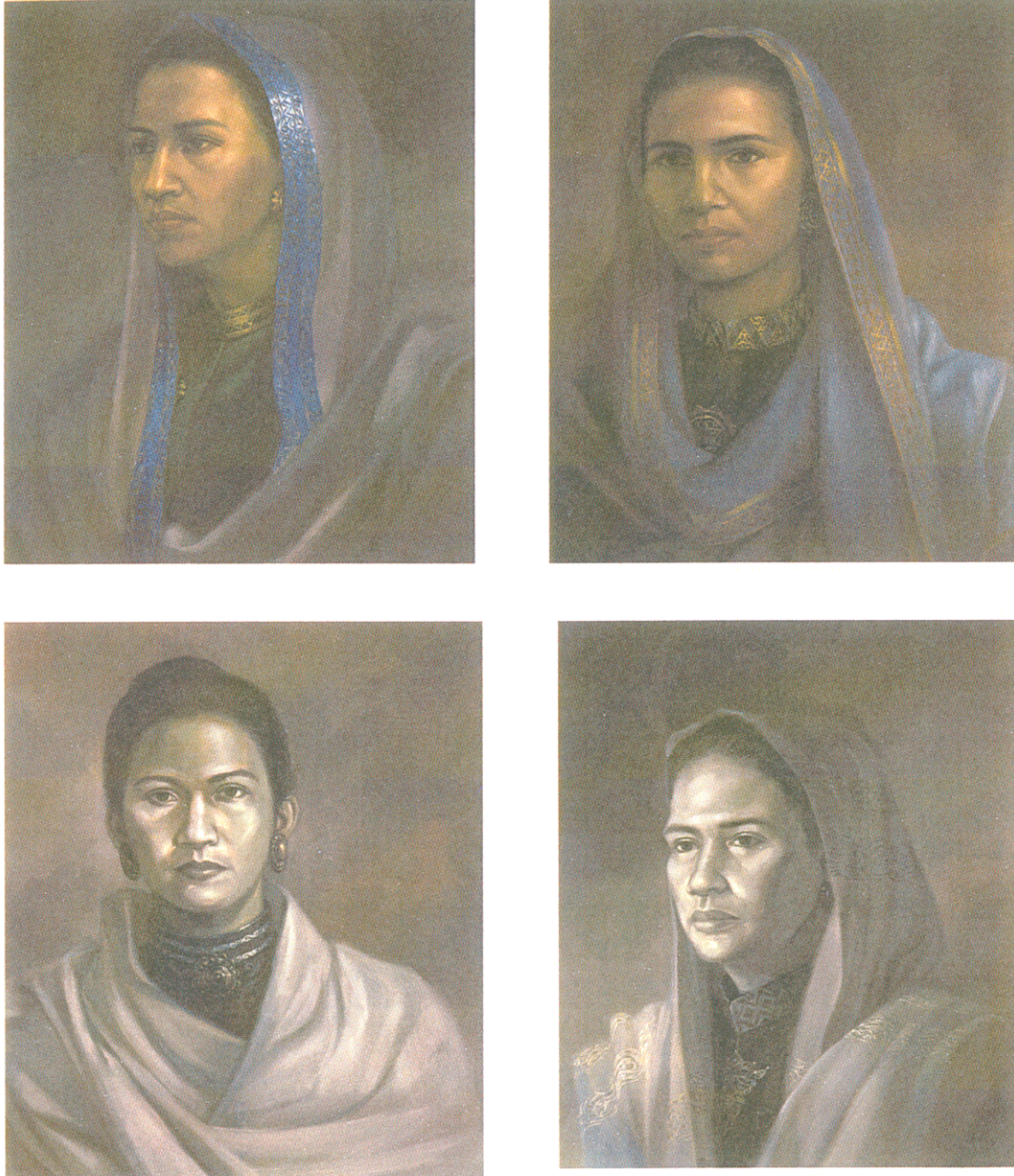
Right: "Laksamana Keumalahayati" (Supria, 1994)

Notice how the hair was tightly knotted into a bun. Combined with the display of weapons and confronting gaze, they look rather androgynous, even masculine. Were it not for the titles, it would be difficult



to distinguish the first two images from men, which is possibly the idea in the first place. Most of the representations were commissioned paintings<sup>21</sup> and as such open to how the artists view (re: glorify) the subject. The following pictures are the rendering of the four Sultanahs.

Photo 2.3.  
Paintings of the Four Queens



Sources:

Top left: "Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah" (Supria, 1994)

Top right: "Sultanah Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin Syah" (Supria, 1994)

Bottom left: "Sultanah Zakiatuddin Inayat Syah" (Supria, 1994)

Bottom right: "Ratu Kamalat Syah" (Supria, 1994)

<sup>21</sup> These paintings were commissioned by an Acehnese *yayasan* or foundation headquartered in Jakarta for publication in 1994.

In these paintings, the extra cloth coverings have replaced the *rencong* (Acehnese dagger). These paintings were commissioned for a book on prominent women in Aceh by expatriate Acehnese in Java. The painter apparently took great care to suppress any hint of sexuality. All women were portrayed in their 40s (compare photos 2.3. with the youths in photo 2.1.), despite the extreme likelihood that they all ascended to the throne in their late 20s (even the oldest, Zakiatuddin Inayat Syah, came to the throne in her mid-30s). Their bodies were covered in clothing carefully painted to hide body lines. Jewellery is also kept to a minimum. These paintings promote images of idealised femininity. They are in contrast with the “manly” female warriors, which promote masculine warriorhood by appearing to resemble men. Also note that despite their “Islamic” modest demeanour, they are not presented in prayer position (unlike in photo 2.1).

Ten years ago such images were seen by most Acehnese women as a source of pride. Today, with the dissemination of feminist education among women combined with the prolonged armed conflict which alienated the people from the government in Aceh, approval of these images are confined to expatriate Acehnese (as a part of overseas identity building process) and political elites (specifically those who benefited from Indonesian government rule). Local women – especially activists who received higher education – believe that these images are used to trick Acehnese women into forgetting the real systemic oppression of women by exaggerating achievements of past individuals. SRY, one of my informants, believes a “liberation project” which includes opposing images such as these must be undertaken to enlighten Acehnese women about gender discrimination in Aceh.



Most Acehese women must be made to understand that circumstances forced the hands of these so-called heroines [of the colonial wars]. Were it not for the absence of a male figure in the leadership, they would never have had a chance to lead. ... Women in Aceh are still voiceless in any decision making.

The "guns and/or jilbab" portrayal of Acehese women is in stark contrast with another type of representation of Aceh. It is the image of the victim specifically, refugees and rape victims.

Photo 2.4.  
Female Refugees



Sources:

Left: "A woman refugee" (South, 2000)

Right: "A fleeing villager" (Kompas, 1999)

These images have only been used quite recently since DOM was lifted in 1998. Both the government and GAM use them to portray each other as brutal and sadistic. They are also the preferred choice of representation used by the Ulama and LSM in presenting their case to the world, and to justify student activism. Interestingly, pro-GAM representations have the only portrayal of women soldiers as "rape victims" (e.g. see photo 2.1.) thus presenting women as victims who fight back.



## 2.4. The Politics of Sexual Symbolism

Without belittling the various gender specific atrocities committed throughout the armed conflict, I conclude from my interviews that the use of the "rape issue" by pro-independence respondents is more effective in garnering public sympathy than presenting an informed plea to improve women's socio-economic conditions. Tempers rose every time we discussed military sexual crimes. On the other hand, unless the interview subjects are activists, other human rights problems such as the "issue of refugee" is often greeted with indifference or downplayed using dismissals such as "everybody suffers not just them." Such gender politics is common in areas of armed conflict. In Aceh, at least, reported victims of such sexual crimes committed in military operations have always been women. While rape of men is also known to be used in armed conflict, no cases have ever been reported in Aceh.

Despite accepting all sorts of women into its rank, the *Inong Balee* (the female division GAM mentioned earlier) retained its "widowed mother" image. Indeed, Acehnese reporters tend to present interviews with these women that emphasise their "maternal aspirations." For example, one of the interviews reported by *Kontras* (an Acehnese tabloid) described two *Inong Balee* members' aspirations:

Does being tied to military training extinguish their womanly instinct? No. Yan and Nur admitted that they are normal women. Therefore, the urge to be married is still strong in their hearts. (*Kontras*, 200a: 7)

The equation of "normal women" with "being married" is strictly the (male) reporter's. Women remain an object to be protected by men. In an interview with an *Inong Balee* commander by a *Kontras* journalist, out of the fourteen questions posed, half of them questioned the woman's independence mostly through her marital status and history.

Did you join GAM specifically because the military have killed your husband?... You vowed revenge because the military murdered your husband. Would you fulfil that vow if the perpetrators are caught?... Is there any member of your troop who have romantic relationship with the military? ... Must the *Inong Balee* members necessarily be widows?... Have you become an *Inong Balee* leader with the permission of your family? ... Why haven't you remarried since your husband is long gone? ... With whom would you consent to marry? (*Kontras*, 2000c:6)

Hence, the status of the women fighters as represented in the media is still attached to an ideal (re: proper) relationship with men. Curiously, the women I encountered seem to dismiss this "women fighter" image since they consider these women are an exceptional few, while the men either voiced doubts or ridicule.

The conflict between traditional expectations to "safeguard our women" and the push to acknowledge the increasing women's role in a changing Aceh create frustration among elite women. Little surprise that when talking about refugees, female LSM activists were critical of men.

This conflict is full of cowardly men. It's bad enough that the Indonesian military rape women, but GAM actually hides under women's skirts. Every time there was news of an upcoming sweeping by the military in the refugee camps,

the women were told to sleep outside while the men slept inside the tents.

Interestingly, only university-educated women activists complained about institutionalised male dominance, such as discrimination in the political parties, discrimination in the workplace, female representation in the justice system, etc. Other women activists emphasise the "women and children as victims" plea. The representation of male victims is kept to a minimum when voicing such complaints. Men appear in the narratives usually as "head of family who can no longer provide for the family" or as "victims of torture and/or murder." There is no mention – even as a possibility – that men too can become rape victims. I suggested the possibility and all I received were shrugs of dismissal. The point is that when obtaining compassion is the objective, women and children are automatically the main ingredient in forming a presentation. When the demand for political independence is the main theme, it is the men that dominate the debate.

There is no mention of sexual crimes committed by GAM though most interview subjects, public GAM statements – even the media – admit that some GAM personel are people of ill repute who have taken advantage of their positive reputation to facilitate them coercing the people. Sexual crimes are represented as "always committed by the Indonesian military". This representation – combined with the extensive use of gendered violence in the local debate on the armed conflict – may signify the racial hysteria of "*their* men" violating "*our* women" commonly propagated in armed struggles (Turshen, 1998:10-13).

Another form of the use of women in symbolic struggles is the presentation of the nation as a woman. The following is an article written by an Ulama who is a regular columnist in Aceh's leading newspaper, *Serambi*.

#### KEPADAMU ACEH

*Duh Aceh, namamu bak nama seorang gadis cantik yang memabukkepayangkan lelaki asing. Antrian mereka merebut perhatianmu agar kamu, Aceh, simpati kepadanya.*

*Diabad ke-18 lelaki Belanda memperkosamu dengan cara biadab. Mahkotamu (Masjid Baiturrahman) mereka bakar dan istana sultan mereka porak-porandakan. Namun, engkau tidak menyerah. Ayahmu Aceh, Sultan Alaidin Muhammad Daudsyah rela dibuang ke pengasingan demi martabatmu yang mulia.*

*Kemudian pria pendek bermata sipit dari negeri Sakura merebutmu dari tangan pria Belanda. Kamu tak pernah dijadikan ratu yang pantas mendapat kehormatan, malah dijadikan budak yang hina-dina.*

*Setelah lelaki penyembah matahari itu minggat, engkau dilamar lelaki Indonesia yang pandai merayu. Kepadamu diberi berbagai gelar yang bisa meninabobokkan kamu, Aceh manis sayangku. Lelaki itu menjulukimu ratu Serambi Mekkah, Bumi Iskandar Muda, Tanah Rencong, Daerah Modal, dan yang terakhir Daerah Istimewa. Lalu ayah dan wali-walimu begitu bangga, mabuk dengan pujian, dan tenggelam dalam persaudaraan yang munafik. Mulutnya memuji-mujimu setinggi langit, tetapi hatinya busuk seperti bangkai yang menyengat indra perasa.*

*Tubuhmu dikuras berdarah, raut wajahmu terbayang luka, hatimu pedih bagai teriris, rencong saktimu menjadi tumpul, baju adat kebesaranmu tinggal dalam museum, dan kopiah meukutop-mu diinjak-injak oleh arogansi sentral kekuasaan.*

*Kini Aceh kusayang, engkau seperti wanita yang terus berduka. Di raut wajahmu yang sendu memang masih tersisa kecantikan warisan Putroe Phang nan jelita. Dalam penderitaan panjang, wajar engkau minta cerai dari suamimu sekarang. Sebab, suamimu yang banyak "gundik" itu tak mampu memberi keadilan sebagaimana yang engkau harapkan.*

*Duh, nasibmu Aceh! Apakah engkau kurang diperhatikan karena jauh dengan pusat kekuasaan? Atau karena engkau terkenal fanatik berpegang teguh kepada ajaran Islam?*

#### FOR YOU, ACEH

Oh Aceh, your name is that of a beautiful girl that intoxicates strange men. They lined up to catch your attention, Aceh, for your sympathies

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a Dutch man raped you viciously. They burned your crown (the Baiturrahman Mosque) and trashed the Sultan's palace. But you did not submit. Your father Aceh, the Sultan Alaidin Muhammad Daudsyah was willing to be exiled for the sake of your honor.

Then a short slanty eyed man from the country of the Sakura took you from the Dutch man. You have never been treated as an honorable queen, rather as a poor slave.

After the sun-worshipping man fled, you were proposed to by an Indonesian man with a silver tongue. You were given various flattering titles, my sweet beloved Aceh. This man called you the gateway to Mecca, the land of Iskandar Muda, the land of the Rencong, the land of assets, and finally the Special Region. Then your father and your guardians were so proud, drunk with flattery, and drowned in hypocritical brotherhood. He praised you to the skies, but his heart was rotten as a stinking corpse.

Your body bled dry, your face scarred, your heart in pain, your powerful *rencong* blunted, your *adat* clothes put in a museum, and your *meukutop* hat trampled by the arrogance of centralised power.

Now, my beloved Aceh, you are a sad woman. Your sad face barely shows the loveliness inherited from the beautiful Putroe Phang. In your long suffering, it is normal that you demand to divorce your current husband. Your husband who has many wives is unable to give you the justice that you hoped for.

Dear, unfortunate Aceh! Were you neglected because of your distance from the centre of power? Or was it because you are famed for your fanatical commitment to Islam?

*Oh, Acehku malang! Saat orang lain bersenang-senang dengan lagu dangdut dan wayang wong, engkau menangis dengan darah dan air mata. Tangisanmu kali ini semakin melengking, jeritanmu semakin nyaring. Dunia sudah mendengarnya. Tapi, apakah dunia bersimpati kepadamu atau tidak? Tak ada yang tahu wahai Aceh sayang, Acehku malang. Biarlah sejarah akan mencatat, seorang putri cantik keturunan mulia, menjadi korban kebiadaban lelaki tak bertanggung jawab.*

Oh, my poor Aceh! When others are having fun listening to *dangdut* and *wayang wong*, you cried shedding blood and tears. Your cry this time is louder. The world heard it. But, does the world sympathise or not? Nobody knows my beloved Aceh, my poor Aceh. Let history record, that a noble beautiful princess, has become the victim of the savagery of irresponsible men.

Note: Original article is in Indonesian rather than Acehnese.  
Source: Ameer Hamzah (1999)

Aceh is presented as a woman who is a passive victim and the military (or the Indonesian government) as the active male aggressor. There is no mention of the armed resistance, merely mention of Aceh "demanding" and "crying." The point is that gendered representation of the conflict exists with women symbolising the victim rather than fighter. The architect of this construct – exemplified by the painter of the historical portraits, the media photo journalists, and the writer of the *Serambi* article – seem to be predominantly men.



# Chapter 3:



## ACHNESE WOMEN IN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE





# **Chapter Three:**

## **ACEHNESE WOMEN IN**

### **THE DOMESTIC SPHERE**

In what way have gendered political constructions in Aceh changed in the past century? Rosaldo (1980) argued that power is gained through culturally valued and legitimated authority, and the public domain is culturally valued more than the private domain. Therefore, those who have influence in the public sphere (i.e. men) are valued more than those who influence the domestic sphere (i.e. women). One example – as described in the previous chapter – is how GAM assigns its female divisions auxiliary and supportive roles rather than political or leadership roles. Gendered political arrangements in the public sphere are but extensions of the gendered arrangements in the domestic or the private sphere. It is therefore important to start with the domestic sphere before one studies a gendered nature of the social and political system.

In the case of Aceh, there seems to be a difference of scholarly opinion regarding the issue. In the domestic sphere, ethnographic studies on Aceh have declared that Acehnese women are independent of their husbands. Siegel (1969) described how a woman is independent in terms of ownership of house, rice fields, and treats the husband as a guest. Jayawardena (1977) explained how – in a reversal of the traditional assumption of the exchange of women in marriage – Acehnese men are viewed by women as valuable assets. He, as well as Siapno (1997), went

further in arguing that women's subordinate position in Aceh are but a recent perception and that women in Aceh have always been the traditionally dominant gender, who constantly suffer from misrepresentations, often expressed in religious terms.

However, ethnographers have failed satisfactorily to explain the gross underrepresentation of Acehnese women in the formal politics of the public sphere. They are divided between the unapologetically Aceh-as-patriarchal premise based on their Islamic faith (e.g. Hurgronje, 1906) and the rather radical-yet-unproven concept of the independent Acehnese women (e.g. Jayawardena, 1977; Siapno, 1997).

Hurgronje failed to appreciate the extent to which the male dominance of the religious judicial system would effect domestic life. He focused mainly on the public sphere, specifically the effects of political Islam. As a result, in his description of Acehnese women's dominance in the household he made erroneous comparisons with Minangkabau women, who are also members of a Muslim society (Hurgronje, 1906a:44). As such, if an analysis focuses only on the Acehnese public sphere, it is easy to conclude that Acehnese men are valued more than women.

Siegel emphasised the different socialisation of Islam among boys and girls yet failed to determine whether such selectivity is prescribed by Islam in general or just by the local traditions (1969: 150-154). He argued about female domination on the domestic front. However, he failed to anticipate the economic and political consequence of a modernising Aceh on gendered arrangements where men dominate a mobile workforce in the modern economic sector. His discussion of men's absence from the

household concluded that such an arrangement was beneficial for women at the time. His argument – based on population movements of merantau (sojourning) – cannot be uncritically applied for situation in which male labour migration occurs in an increasingly mobile and globalised world.

Jayawardena (1977) did not take into account the effects of changing demographic patterns – especially migration – in his analysis. The male-exchange arrangements on marriage partially for economic purposes that he described was doomed due to the practice of sojourning and marrying out of Aceh. There is an increasing incidence of successful Acehnese men opting to marry non-Acehnese women. Many Acehnese DPRD (regional people's representative) male members are married to non-Acehnese wives.<sup>22</sup> Even the current governor is married to a Javanese.<sup>23</sup> In the context laid out by Jayawardena and taking into account the consequences of an outmigrating male population (the demands of the modern labour market for a mobile workforce), one might say that there is a growing shortage of sought-after men who are marriagable in Aceh. From this perspective Acehnese women are left with men who are burdens rather than assets.

Siapno (1997) failed to explain whether the separate-but-equal working arrangements for women that she identifies has been beneficial or makes things worse for women. She did not address the gender composition of leadership positions nor the paid workforce in Aceh. Her

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<sup>22</sup> Data obtained from informants and local print media. Though official lists are non-existent, most DPRD family members are quite well known especially among Banda Aceh citizens. The Acehnese political elite lead quite public lives and are constantly subject to public scrutiny.

<sup>23</sup> The wife of Governor T. Abdullah Puteh – Dra. Hj. Marlinda Irwanti – is his second wife. She is a former television presenter working for TVRI, the state-owned television station.

study focused mainly on representations of gender, which – as we have seen in the previous chapter – may be used for propagandic purposes of the powerful. To be fair, she did acknowledge this possibility. However, she failed to assess how successful these types of representation are in Aceh (whether these representations translate into social practice).

Despite their thorough descriptions, none of these ethnographers analytically link the gender relations of domestic life with the gendered power of political and public life.

### 3.1. Marriages

Great care must be taken in the analysis of Acehnese domestic life. First of all, it would be a mistake to assume that the same set of gender relationships exist everywhere in Aceh. At first glance, it is easy to mistakenly conclude that the Acehnese kinship system is matrilineal like the Minangkabau (e.g. Hurgronje, 1906). Anthropological works on Aceh have concluded that bilateral kinship is common in coastal Aceh – mainly Greater Aceh, Pidie, West Aceh, North Aceh and East Aceh – while the Gayo and the Alas who lived in the highlands are more lineally structured societies (Siegel, 1969; Bowen, 1983; Azra, 1992). There is also the discussion that Aceh is a society with patrilineal features coming from the influence of Syafi'ie Islam and matrilineal features originating from the old customs or *adat* (Jayawardena, 1977b; Mansur, 1982; Nyak Pah, 1985). It would also be a mistake to assume that these distinctions are strictly exclusive. For example, there are cases of families with bilineal relationships in the highlands as well as cases of families with patrilineal relationships in coastal areas, which may be caused by social mobility and

translocal marriages. In Leigh's research of the Acehnese education system (1992), her survey results indicated that – excluding arranged marriages – young Acehnese preference for a spouse is predominantly determined by religion.

Table 3.1.  
Spouse Preference\*

|                                                        | Female<br>(%) | Male<br>(%) | Total Average(%) |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-------------|------------------|
| It doesn't matter as long as Muslim                    | 65            | 46          | 55.5             |
| Acehnese                                               | 15            | 26          | 20.5             |
| It doesn't matter as long as I love him/her            | 12            | 16          | 14               |
| It doesn't matter as long as the spouse has a good job | 6             | 6           | 6                |
| Other reason                                           | 2             | 2           | 2                |
| Javanese                                               | 0             | 2           | 1                |
| Chinese                                                | 0             | 2           | 1                |
|                                                        | 100           | 100         | 100              |

Note: \* Answer to the question "Who is your preferred husband or wife?"

Source: Data is sorted by total average which was calculated from Leigh (1992: 338).

This data shows that ethnicity is not a primary determinant for spouse preference. Aceh is a geographical crossroad of the Malacca region. Interactions between communities with outsiders – especially in the coastal areas – are historically constant to the extent that in some parts of Aceh, people have dual cultural identities. This account is from an informant:

If you go by land in a bus from Padang (West Sumatra) to Meulaboh (West Aceh) you might sometimes notice some passenger who chat in *bahasa Padang* (the language used by the Minangkabau) but once the bus passed Tapak Tuan (South Aceh) they suddenly switch to Acehnese. This means that the person's family has strong ties with another family who lives in West Sumatra, which is common for West Acehnese.

Relative isolationism has only been experienced recently due to the armed conflict of the 1990s especially because of the Indonesian

government's closure of the free port of Sabang (in early 1980s, which was reopened in 2000). During this era, there was substantial outward migration, especially among the wealthy elite (who become expatriates) and the landless poor (who become refugees).

The fact is, Aceh is not an isolated, static, and immobile society. The private and public spheres in Aceh are strongly linked with each other. Kinship systems are relevant in the discussion of the public sphere as long as they matter in shaping economic and political alliances. In the feudal times of the Sultan and Uleebalang, local social relations and social status played an important role in maintaining political legitimacy. It is no coincidence that all of the women warriors previously cited needed to marry an important elite male before they could command an effective force against the Dutch. Marriage is important for men and women alike for status as well as for other socio-economic reasons. This was as true in the past as it is at present. Only the purpose and reasoning behind marriages have changed. Today, finding a job is a problem faced not just by an adult individual but is an issue for the entire family. In a modernising Aceh, an unemployed person – especially a man – brings shame to his/her family. Such a view persists even in the rural regions, where economic pressures to find extra income is increasing. Family and kin are important sources of information for finding work, and marriages can be seen as an effort to expand the job network. Consequently, there is a strong emphasis on the type of work and work status of a potential spouse. An Acehnese proverb stated that "*meunyo tameukawen nyang siwadan, meunyo tameurakan nyang top meunalee*." ("If you want to marry find an equal, if you want friendship find someone who can keep secrets.") The word *siwadan* (Indonesian form:

*sepadan*) means of equal rank, in status as well as wealth. It is easy to judge from this proverb that marriages in practical terms are economic partnerships. Indeed the most common marital complaint is that the spouse – mostly husbands – does not bring enough income to the household. Jayawardena (1977) went so far as to conclude that marriages are a system for the exchange of men whose merits are appraised on their ability to bring in income. When it comes to domestic decision making, there is no doubt who is in charge, according to Jayawardena.

In contrast with Siegel's observation that husbands are powerless "houseguests" in their own home (1969:179-180), in contemporary Aceh this was not reflected in interviews I conducted. Every women I interviewed complained about "women's oppression by men" while the men I interviewed constantly repeated that they were the "captain of the boat" in accordance with Islamic teachings. Interestingly, none of the men said anything about the influence of sexist Indonesian state policies and practices while the women (especially the activists) did. The status of the husband is *jonjongan* (the head or leader) and the wife is *jeunulang* (the manager).<sup>24</sup> All Acehnese that I interviewed did argue that the wife is referred to as *po rumoh* (owner of the house) indicating her superior position to the husband in domestic matters. However, they also indicated that in social matters – including marriage arrangements of children – the husband has the final say. Of this I can only say that the title of *po rumoh* rang hollow since it basically glorifies what is essentially a process of the

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<sup>24</sup> It is important to point out that there is little evidence that this is solely caused by the New Order Indonesian law regarding marriages. Other forms of ideology or norms are also at play. For a start, patriarchal Islam is a major influence and its leaders in Aceh are men.

domestication of women.<sup>25</sup> These responses indicated that the public/private dichotomy is very much gendered in Aceh. Either women have never perceived themselves as having authority over the household, or that gender relationships in Aceh have changed since Siegel's study.

Post-revolutionary Ulama-dominated Acehnese politics as well as the modern patriarchal Indonesian state significantly influence the changes in gender relationships. Indeed, Siegel himself acknowledged these things as a potential rival to a less patriarchal society in Aceh. He was rather optimistic in his assessment and declared that:

... so long as kinship and locality were the bases of social organisation, reform movements could not succeed in making Islamic law as the Ulama conceived it the basis of social life in any permanent way. (1969:67)

Unfortunately time has proven him wrong. In the capital of Banda Aceh itself the number of mosques is arguably the largest in Indonesia, with one every 500 metres or so. It is an entire industry which employs religious school graduates who reportedly have more difficulty in finding employment in the workforce than state school graduates. The profession of *juru dakwah* (preacher) in Aceh at the moment is still a male-dominated profession with the number of women beginning to rise (Qurnati, 1994). As Aceh slowly has modernised it turns out that everyone in Aceh has wanted

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<sup>25</sup> A term coined by Susan Barbara to describe sex discrimination process against women in developing countries. For further discussion on the topic, see Rogers (1980).



to or has had no choice but to be seen as a member of a Muslim community, whose dominant values are still the patriarchal form of Islam.<sup>26</sup>

This "Islamic modernisation" legitimised the business of arranging weddings and marriages as strictly a male affair. First, weddings have always been officiated by a male, a *Teungku Meunasah* or *Teungku Sagoe*, who since the implementation of the 1974 Indonesian marriage law must also be supplemented by the services of a state official representing the *Kantor Urusan Agama* (office of religious affairs), the *keuchik* or *penghulu*.

Second, preparation for the marriage ritual has always been a communal activity, especially among the women. Table 3.2. indicated the dominance of the bride's family in arranging marriage rituals. Families who arrange marriages and weddings without involving the neighborhood might end up with a "boycotted" wedding ceremony, which would be a huge embarrassment. In Banda Aceh, this is no longer the case. For the sake of convenience, more people relegate the wedding ceremonies and rituals to paid professionals. Thus, the women of the family no longer dominate the rituals of weddings.

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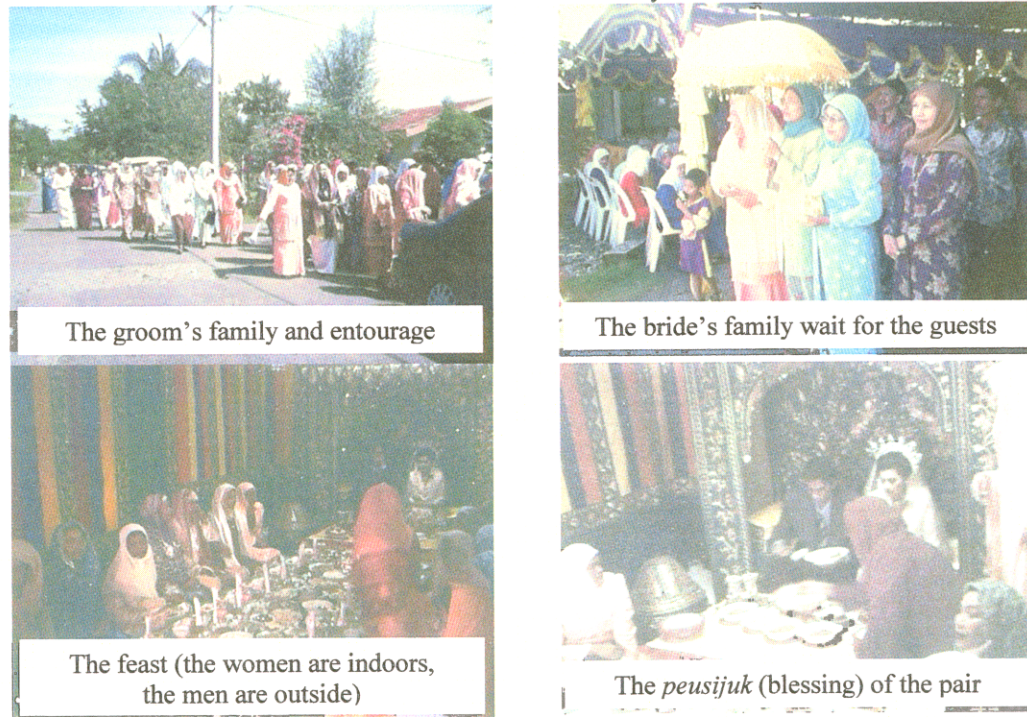
<sup>26</sup> This tendency began in the aftermath of the 1959 *Darul Islam* rebellion. Throughout the 1960s, the all-male Ulama dominated policy making in Aceh resulted in a rather theocratic governance with relatively hardline approach to Islamic practices. This is discussed in great detail by B.J. Boland (1982:174-185) as well as Mansur (1982).

Table 3.2.  
List of Major Events in an Acehese Marriage

|                                |                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Meulakeé</i>             | Period of courtship, proposal and engagement                                                       |
| 2. <i>Tanda konghaba narit</i> | Gift exchange during the engagement period                                                         |
| 3. <i>Meunikah</i>             | Wedding ceremony                                                                                   |
| 4. <i>Mat djaroe malém</i>     | Exchange of wedding vows                                                                           |
| 5. <i>Tueng darabaro</i>       | Delivery of the bride by her family to the groom's house                                           |
| 6. <i>Antat linto</i>          | Delivery of the groom by his family to the bride's house                                           |
| 7. <i>Teurimong bésan</i>      | The bride's family receive the groom's family                                                      |
| 8. <i>Meuturi</i>              | Introducing the groom to the bride's neighborhood                                                  |
| 9. <i>Masa goh peumeukleh</i>  | Period before separation when the wife is still economically supported by her family               |
| 10. <i>Peumeukleh</i>          | Time of separation. After the firstborn child, the couple now must economically support themselves |

Source: Syah (1974) and Mustadjib (1977)

Photo 3.1.  
An *Antat Linto* Ceremony



Source: Fieldwork.

Third, in the case of arranging marriages, women also lose control over the decision making process. Table 3.3. show that forced marriages still exist in Aceh (these are reported cases, the true number remain unknown).

Table 3.3.  
Number of Forced Marriage Cases Filed  
in the Acehnese Religious Court

| Year | Forced Marriage | Year | Forced Marriage |
|------|-----------------|------|-----------------|
| 1984 | 5               | 1992 | 5               |
| 1985 | 4               | 1993 | 10              |
| 1986 | 8               | 1994 | 13              |
| 1987 | 2               | 1995 | 4               |
| 1988 | 9               | 1996 | 4               |
| 1989 | 9               | 1997 | 5               |
| 1990 | 8               | 1998 | 12              |
| 1991 | 1               | 1999 | 12              |

Source: Compiled from BPS data.

It is a widespread expectation in various societies in Indonesia – including Aceh – that a woman should marry a man of higher standing (in terms of age, wealth, and social position). To marry a man who is deemed “beneath her” is undesirable as it is viewed to be a source of future discord.

In one of my interviews with SRY, a university graduate woman activist in her 30s with a rural background, she described marriage arrangements in her village a few months back as follows:

The parents [of the two families] first talk in the front room. When things are about to get serious, all of the women move to the back of the house. The connecting door or curtains are closed and the women can't even listen to the conversation. There are only two occasions when they can re-enter the front room and that is either to provide coffee to the guests or when the whole marriage arrangement is settled.

She described that only because she enjoyed higher education, which boosted her status in her family significantly, she was able to resist her family regarding her marital arrangements. She resisted similar arrangements made for her sister but failed. She believed strongly that

Acehnese women should be liberated from such arrangements. Another of my women respondents, RHN, a middle aged academic of middle class background, went further in saying that:

In the village of youth if you were an unmarried daughter, you couldn't even see house guests unless it was to provide coffee. This happened not just during marriage arrangements but every time a guest visited.

Differences in the treatment of sons and daughters extend to matters other than marriage arrangements. Sons are considered to carry on the family name. Daughters are not. Great disappointment is expressed should a son fail to live up to expectations such as finding a good job, finding a spouse, and siring children. Disappointment in daughters is usually in regard to their ability to manage the house as well as their social behavior. Failure to help out with household chores would lead to severe criticism, especially by the mother. The reasoning given is that such incompetence could very well continue after she is married, and there is nothing more shameful than a wife who mismanages the household to such extent that her husband has to interfere in her affairs. Such a woman is considered "*inong peugada lakoe*" ("a wife who mistreated her husband"). RHN described the times in her village when she was young that,

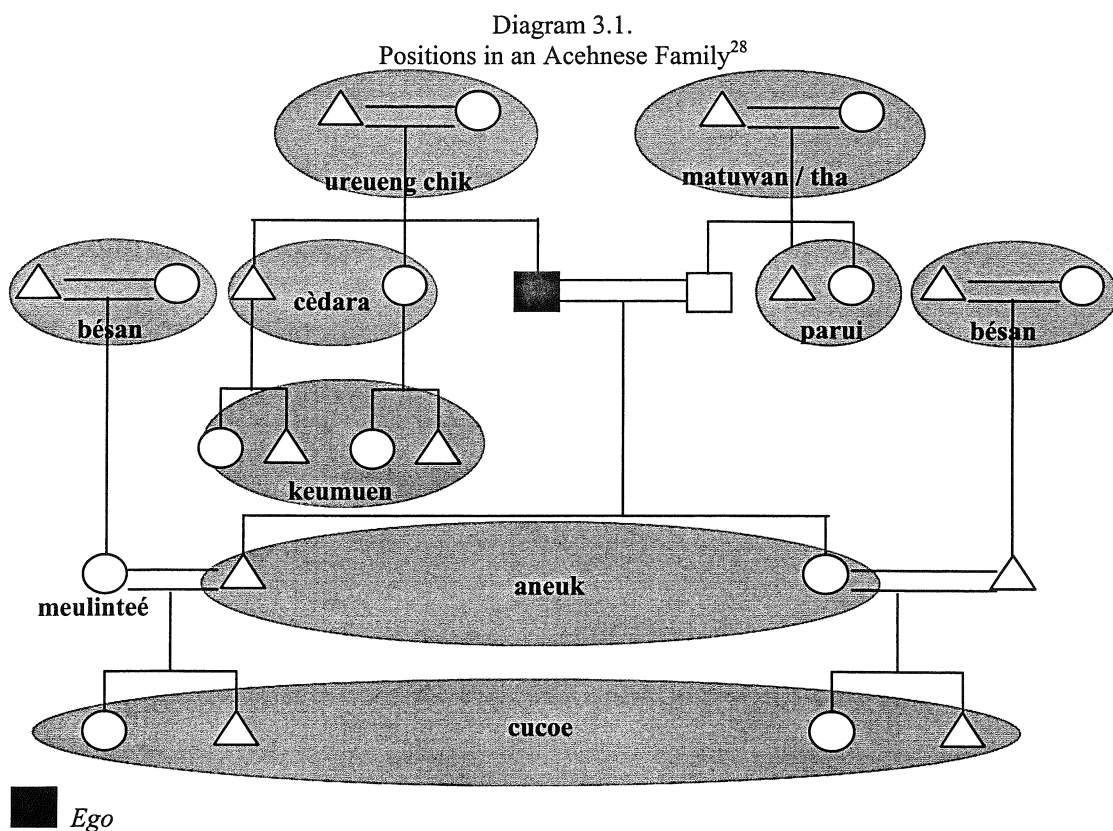
If a husband cooks in the kitchen, at least three villages will talk about it. There is nothing more embarrassing for a woman than to have her husband help out in the kitchen. It shows her incompetence.

Indeed, in the field I find that these practices of gendered division of household labour so ingrained that the one thing that marked me out as a foreigner – despite my best effort to "be male" – during visits to a

household is that everytime the lady of the house served us (the talking men) drinks or any other services I bothered to voice my gratitude. I was told that it marked me out as a Javanese (which I am not).

### 3.2. The Family

Siegel described the Acehnese kinship system as Hawaiian (1969:138). Mansur, however, argued that only the terms of *address* follow the Hawaiian system while the terms of *reference* can be classified as Eskimo<sup>27</sup> (1982:19). This analytical confusion is because Acehnese use the term *cèdara* (kin) and *kawom* (family) in daily life to describe siblings as well as cousins (close or distant) from both sides of the family.



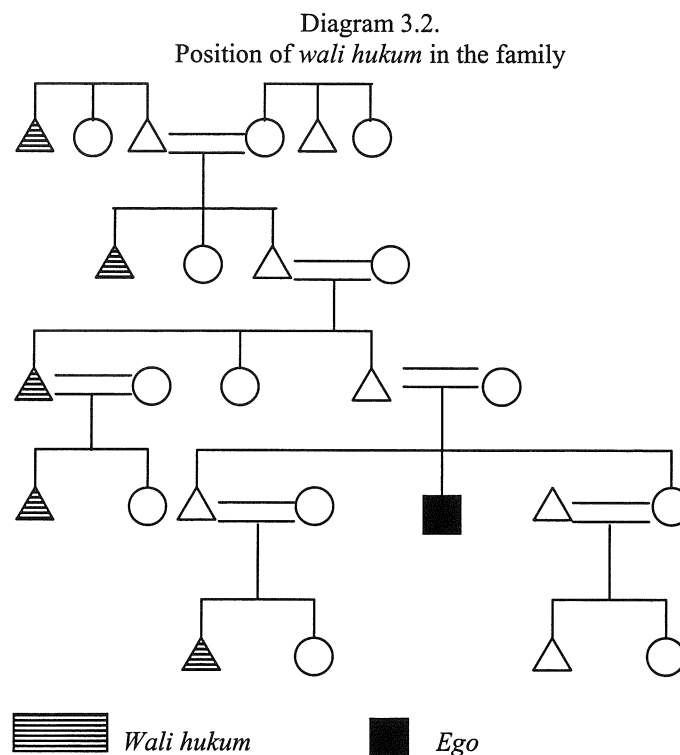
<sup>27</sup> In a Hawaiian kinship system all cousins are equated with siblings. In the Eskimo kinship system all cousins are equated with each other but differentiated from siblings (Schusky, 1965:22).

<sup>28</sup> This is an brief outline of aspects of the Acehnese kinship system. For a more detailed list of Acehnese kinship terms, see Mansur (1982).

In an Acehese family, a person's father's brother (FB), father's father brother (FFB) and brother's son (Bs) are called *wali*. The word is originally Arabic meaning guardian or steward. In Acehese it refers to the male line. In the Islamic practices of the Acehese, a *wali* can be the deceased person's heir. The *wali* is also the guardian of the children of the deceased, especially the daughters. A *wali* is obliged to seek recompense in court should the death occur from unnatural causes. This is why the *wali* is also referred to as *wali hukum* (legal guardian). The relationship with the mother's brother (MB), mother's father's brother (MFB), mother's mother brother (MMFB) and sister's son (ZS) is called *karong* or as Chandra Jayawardena (1977) reported it, *wali adat*. The *karong* is in the female line, it is the same position as *wali hukum* but without the legal rights and obligation. The relationship between the *wali hukum* and *karong* is a *respect relationship* (Eggan, 1955:79) and the nature of the relationship depends on factors such as residential proximity, visiting intensity, socio-economic status, knowledge of tradition, and moral reputation. Today – especially in the urban areas – the importance of this relationship reflects on socio-economic conditions. Wealthy family members do not have to do much to maintain the *karong* relationship except at important family occasions like births, weddings or deaths. Such wealthy family members often fulfill the obligations of *wali hukum* even though they are technically *karong*. Other family members still have to maintain good relationships especially with the *wali hukum* who is obligated to aid family members who need aid (usually in forms of money or jobs).

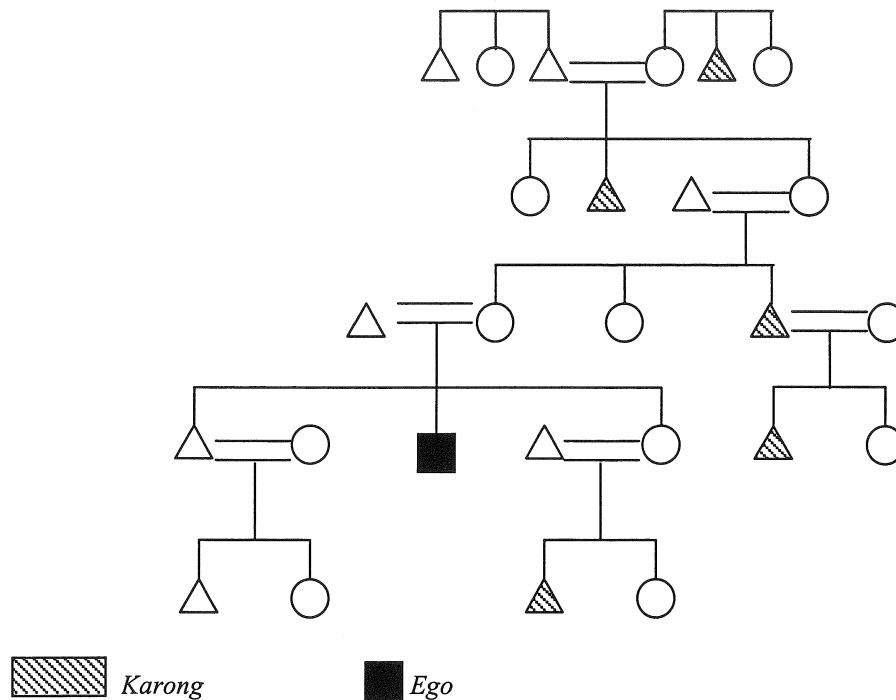
The relationship with a mother's brother (a *karong*) is usually less formal and more amiable than with a father's brother (a *wali hukum*). This is

understandable considering the different economic and power relations that exist in relation to a *wali hukum*. The relationship between a person and their parents in-law (*meulintée ngon matuwan* relationship) as well as with the siblings in-law (*parui*) is usually an *avoidance relationship* (Eggan, 1955:79). In the case of *matuwan*, the ego – especially the men – is both in the subordinate position as well as a perceived outsider. In the case of *parui* – especially of the opposite sex – the avoidance may have something to do with sexual taboo.<sup>29</sup> A man is *malu* (lit. embarrassed, timid, shy) with all his married male consanguines and affines, while a woman is free and close with all her female consanguines and affines (Jayawardena, 1977b:25).



<sup>29</sup> The exception is the relationship with very young (children under 5 years old) in-laws, which are usually spoilt by both families. This sort of relationship applies to both male or female.

Diagram 3.3.  
Position of *karong* in the family



As the kinship diagrams shows (diagram 3.2. and 3.3.), despite the existence of a bilateral system, legally and economically the women of the family are significantly disadvantaged because the men formally hold the title of both *wali hukum* as well as *karong*. The men in the family must economically provide for the women. Women, on the other hand, are expected to manage and take care of the family, a task that doubles once they marry. Once married, a woman's obligations extend to her *matuwan* (parents-in-law) even if they live in a different household. She might end up having to care for two households. Her success in building (at least the appearance of) a formally amiable relationship – which is usually made difficult by the requirements for *avoidance behavior* – is deemed an important test case for the relationship between the two families. A good wife is called "*inong nyang carong tueng ate tuah*" ("a wife who can win the hearts of parents-in-law"). One of the most commonly expressed views supporting this stance is the following popular proverb.



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|                                     |                                   |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Breueh puteh ie bangoe,</i>      | White rice of good scent,         |
| <i>ureueng binoe peuet peukara.</i> | womenfolk have four requirements. |
| <i>Bangsawan, budiman,</i>          | Nobility, kindness,               |
| <i>rupaan ngon aturan,</i>          | appearance and orderliness,       |
| <i>rupa got,</i>                    | good looks,                       |
| <i>peurangoe jroh,</i>              | good behaviour,                   |
| <i>bangsa leubeh seureuta neh.</i>  | good manners as well as speech.   |

This existing set of relationships seem to have relaxed during my observation in the field. Emphasis is placed far more on direct offspring and immediate family. Distant kin are held in formal esteem only. More often a functional extended family relationship depends on the strength of the economic relationship. A decade ago I can remember how a family member who came to the city from a distant village was received with enthusiasm and quickly helped to stand on his/her feet. Today, they are seen more as a burden on family assets. In-laws still receive their due respect, especially parents-in-law. However, the role of *wali hukum* is rapidly becoming just as ceremonial as the *karong*, at least in the city. One can see this as partly beneficial for women's standing in the family because they have better recognition and control over family status and economic prosperity.

### 3.3. The Children

The relationship between husbands and wives have been partially explored by Siegel (1969). In his description husbands bring in income, they come, eat, and go. Wives manage the household, serve husbands when they visit (Siegel refers to them as "house guests"), and raise children. Little has been written about the relationship between parents and children. An interesting relationship in the family is between father and daughter. Up until the time she is married, a father is distant from his

daughter, even strict to the point of him being referred to as "*bui kabom rantré*" ("a pig chewing on the chain")<sup>30</sup>, which means he seldom talks to her even though they are sitting together at home. After she is married, however, the relationship changes. He speaks with her more often and maintains a warm relationship to the point that she is consulted in solving family problems. The same closeness does not apply to mother-son relationship. The proverb "*hukom aneuk wali bak eumbah, bah that payah maji tron ek*" ("children belong to the father, in spite of the fact that it is the mother who raised them") is strictly applied to the sons. Levels of intimacy and warmth between mother and son are restricted from an early age. When the son is six years old his mother introduces taboos on things that boys should not be doing, such as being in the kitchen with mother or sister. In this regard, the mother is a primary agent of reproducing masculine values since father's involvement in child raising is minimal.

Mothers and daughters enjoy a much more intimate and close relationship which lasts for life. Although the view expressed in the proverb "*tapeugot aweuek bek tutong jaroe, tameuaneuk bek payah droe*" ("spoons are made so the hands won't burn, children are raised to relieve burdens") applies to sons and daughters, it is the daughters that are raised specifically with the expectation to care for her parents when they grow up. Sons are expected to travel to find work. Daughters stay at home and even if they are married, they are still expected to visit the parents often to care for them. These are parental expectations which sometimes differ from reality.

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<sup>30</sup> This metaphor is used derogatively. A pig (the father) who is too busy chewing on its chains (finding a living) is so intent on the task that it neglects to care for its litter. While Acehnese are predominantly Muslim who are forbidden to eat pork, some Acehnese own pig farms and the meat produce is exported to North Sumatra and Singapore.

Mothers also maintain a strict disciplinary control over the daughters, especially in teaching housework as well as the proper conduct of relationships with young men. Acehnese parents in general are overtly anxious about their teenage daughters' sexuality. Extramarital sex is an extremely shameful affair should it happen, and it is often stated that "*mangat tajaga keubeue saboh weue, nibak tageugeue sidroe aneuk dara*" ("it is easier to watch over two buffaloes in one shed than watching over a daughter"). Both adult male and female respondents have complained about the "lack of morality" among today's generations indicating an anxiety over changes in values. RHN, a middle-aged lecturer, described her students at IAIN:

Young people – especially the women – no longer respect their elders. The way they talk, how they address you, how they pose questions, none of them indicate respect. We constantly rebuke women for dressing improperly, but they ignore us. People used to respect teachers, nowadays we're just employees.

It is interesting to note that she singled out young women as "worse" than the young men. Another complaint was voiced by AD, an "old guard" conservative Baghdad University graduate Ulama. Like RHN, AD also complained to me about Acehnese youth, singling out female behaviour and appearance.

Nowadays young people simply have no respect. Never mind to their elders, but not even to themselves. We have young women wearing *jilbab* (head cover) yet they wear tight clothing and tight pants. What's the point? Even IAIN students copied the Unsyiah (the state university) students rather than setting an example.

At this point it is important to note that wearing *jilbab* (head cover) and *selendang* (head scarf) is a relatively recent practice imposed on women. Until the mid-1990s, it was a non-compulsory piece of public clothing. In 1997 when the DOM officially ended, the local government decided that Aceh must become “more Islamic” and made wearing *jilbab* in public compulsory. During my research in Aceh, I saw plenty of young women who wore the *jilbab/selendang-jeans* or *jilbab/selendang-t-shirt* combination.

Photos 3.2.



Left: An Acehese teenage couple with the girl wearing a headscarf and jeans.

Right: A more “rebellious” Acehese teenage couple, neither wearing Islamic headgear.

Source: field photos

The *jilbab* issue is regarded by most Islam-based elite as an important test case of Acehese moral standards, so much so that the issue was always brought up in many seminars on Acehese women. The context of the discussion is usually in how to “improve moral behavior.” The debates explicitly centered on self-improvement (whether improving one’s physical appearance to be “more Islamic” would automatically improve the

person's behaviour) and modesty (how not to incite the *nafsu* or lust among men which might provoke "immoral behavior"). These are debates over whether or not people should conform to a more modest and Islamic identity. They are debates which often employ strategies of blaming the victim (i.e. it is the women's fault for encouraging the men to behave badly).

### 3.4. Divorces

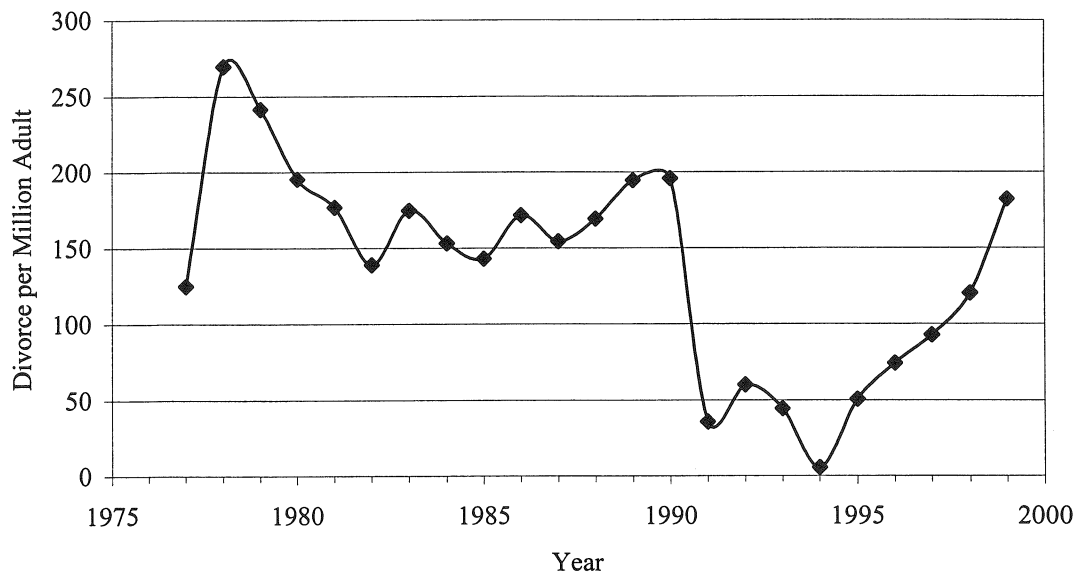
The number of divorces have risen (see graph 3.1. below). Until 1977, following the introduction of the 1974 marriage law, the number of divorce cases were not listed in any of the official regional statistical records. Divorce remained a shameful and private affair. Marital problems almost always are expected to be reconciliated through family efforts. In his study of Aceh in the 1960s, Siegel argued that most conflicts in marriage concern money (1969:174). He reported that there was a perception among men that they always lived up to their financial obligations while among women the men were seen to never do this. Maintaining a marriage was seen as preferable to divorce<sup>31</sup> especially if children were involved. Today, however, there are changes in this perception. Divorce is seen as better than maintaining a bad marriage. This change in attitude coincided with improving economic conditions for women in Aceh. The divorce rate peaked in the late 1970s as an effect of the introduction of 1974 marriage law as it allow women to file for divorce through government institution, bypassing traditional and religious institution which are often biased against women. After this period of "divorce boom" the rate declined and

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<sup>31</sup> The most powerful one is family pressure. Since divorce is seen as shameful – not just to the couple – then efforts are always made to reconcile.

stabilised for a decade. There was a significant drop between 1990 and 1994 during the DOM years but it began to rise again in 1995. One possible explanation is that during the first years of DOM people were reluctant, too afraid or unable to file for divorce in the religious courts.

Graph 3.1.  
Divorce Rate in Aceh



Source: Compiled from BPS data.

Another possible explanation is that the main reasons for divorce have changed. Islamic laws allow divorce if circumstances warrant or necessitate it. Islam has permitted divorce reluctantly, neither liking nor recommending it. Indeed, Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam is reported to have stated that "Among lawful things, divorce is most disliked by Allah" (*hadith* according to Abu Daud). Islam has not made it necessary that the grounds of divorce should be publicized. This, however, does not mean that Islam views divorce lightly. In fact, publicity of grounds may not be of any positive consequence. Although the grounds may not be pronounced, they are supposed to be genuine. On the other hand, the grounds may be

stated and may in reality be false. It is for this reason that court comes in as a last resort in the Islamic scheme of separation of husband and wife. The Qur'an states as regards grounds of divorce in very general terms:

الطَّلَاقُ مَرَّتَانٍ فَإِمْسَاكَ بِمَعْرُوفٍ أَوْ تَسْرِيحٌ بِإِحْسَنٍ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَكُمُ أَنْ  
تَأْخُذُوا مِمَّا آتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ شَيْئًا إِلَّا أَنْ يَخَافَا أَلَّا يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ اللَّهِ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ  
أَلَّا يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ اللَّهِ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِمَا فِيمَا افْتَدَتْ بِهِ تِلْكَ حُدُودُ  
اللَّهِ فَلَا تَعْتَدُوهَا وَمَنْ يَتَعَدَّ حُدُودَ اللَّهِ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

The divorce is twice, after that, either you retain her on reasonable terms or release her with kindness. And it is not lawful for you (men) to take back (from your wives) any of your *mahr* (bridal money given by the husband to his wife at the time of marriage) which you have given them, except when both parties fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by Allah (e.g. to deal with each other on a fair basis). Then if you fear that they would not be able to keep the limits ordained by Allah, then there is no sin on either of them if she gives back (the *mahr* or a part of it) for her *al-khul'* (divorce). These are the limits ordained by Allah, so do not transgress them. And whoever transgresses the limits ordained by Allah, then such are the *zâlimûn* (wrong-doers, etc.). (The Qur'an, 2:229).

The general ground of divorce in the Qur'an, therefore, is hopeless failure of one or both parties to discharge their marital duties and to consort with each other. Islamic jurists have developed some indices which may be accepted as grounds of divorce in case the divorce matter goes to the court. Long absence of husband without any information, long imprisonment, refusal to provide for a wife, and impotence etc. are some of the grounds on which a wife can ask for divorce. Either party may take

steps to divorce in case of chronic disease, insanity, deceptive misrepresentation during marriage contract, or desertion.

A Muslim male is allowed three opportunities to make a pronouncement or act of divorce provided that each divorce is pronounced during the time when the wife is in a period of purity (that is not in her menstrual time). A husband may divorce his wife once and let the *iddat* (the period of waiting after divorce) pass. During the waiting period, the two have the option of being reconciled. If however the waiting period passes without reconciliation, they stand fully divorced. If after the first divorce the husband is reconciled with his wife but the hostility and conflict begins all over again, he may divorce her a second time in the same manner as stated above. In this case also he can return to her during the *iddat*. If however, after second reconciliation, he divorces the wife the third time, he can not take back the wife during the *iddat*. She is totally prohibited for him. The wife, thereafter can marry any person she likes according to her choice. The wife can divorce her husband if this condition is stipulated in the marriage contract. This kind of divorce is called 'delegated divorce' (*thalak taffiz*).

Marriage can also be dissolved through mutual consent. This is called *khula* in the technical language of Islamic law. Marriage can also be dissolved by judicial process through the court on complaint of the wife on the grounds explained before. One of the consequences of the divorce is the commencement of a waiting period for the wife. This usually lasts three months. If there is a pregnancy, it lasts as long as pregnancy lasts. The waiting period is basically a term of probation during which reconciliation



can be attempted. It is also required to establish whether the wife has conceived. It also allows time for planning the future. Maintenance of a wife during the waiting period is an obligation on the husband. The wife can not be expelled from her place of residence and he can not in any way harass her. Such harassment would constitute a moral as well as a criminal offence. In case of divorce, the young children remain in the custody of their divorced mother. However, the father has to provide the cost of the maintenance of young children though they remain under the custody of mother.

The Islamic law of divorce is based on practical considerations. The process of separation is basically a matter between a husband and wife. However, when conflict arises, attempts are made for reconciliation. Judicial process is not obligatory in divorce for reasons explained earlier. The intervention of court has nowhere reduced the number of divorce. Judicial process in Islam is the last resort in so far as divorce is concerned.

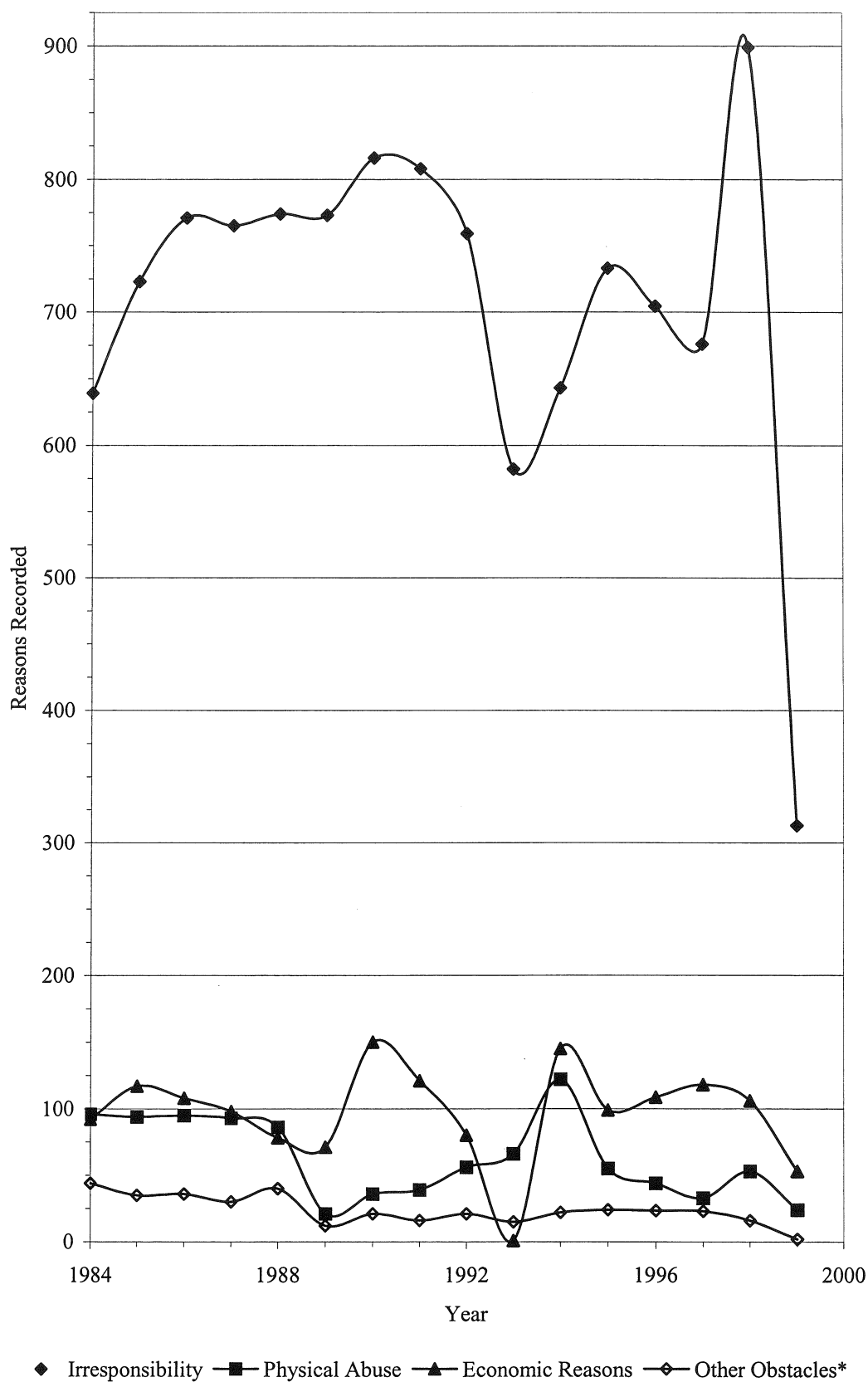
Disharmony and irresponsibility are the main reasons for divorce filed in the Acehnese religious courts. As graphs 3.2. and 3.3. below indicate, the only significant change throughout the years is a steady decline in family disharmony as the reason. Economic reasons for divorce remained the same and therefore can be considered a minor determinant for initiating divorce.

Acehnese are more vocal in filing a legal complaint if their spouse has misbehaved compared to if they are not contributing to family income. The trends shown in graphs 3.2. and 3.3. supported the growing perception that marriage is "more than just about money." The most obvious change in

the top three reasons is the decline in *akhlak* as grounds for divorce. *Akhlak* – derived from the Arabic word for “behaviour” – is basically a complaint that the spouse is engaging in improper publicly-known behaviour, usually vices such as prostitution, alcoholism, and gambling. This downward trend may also mean that these “immoral activities” may simply underreported. In a growing conservatively organised society, to confess that a divorce is being filed for improper behaviour would imply that the marriage was the result of bad choice or bad matchmaking, thus blaming entire families for failing to “screen” good spouses in the past. To make things more complicated, the 1974 marriage law is aimed to make divorces difficult, which is in line with its principle of promoting stable and long-lasting families (Mustadjib, 1977:47).

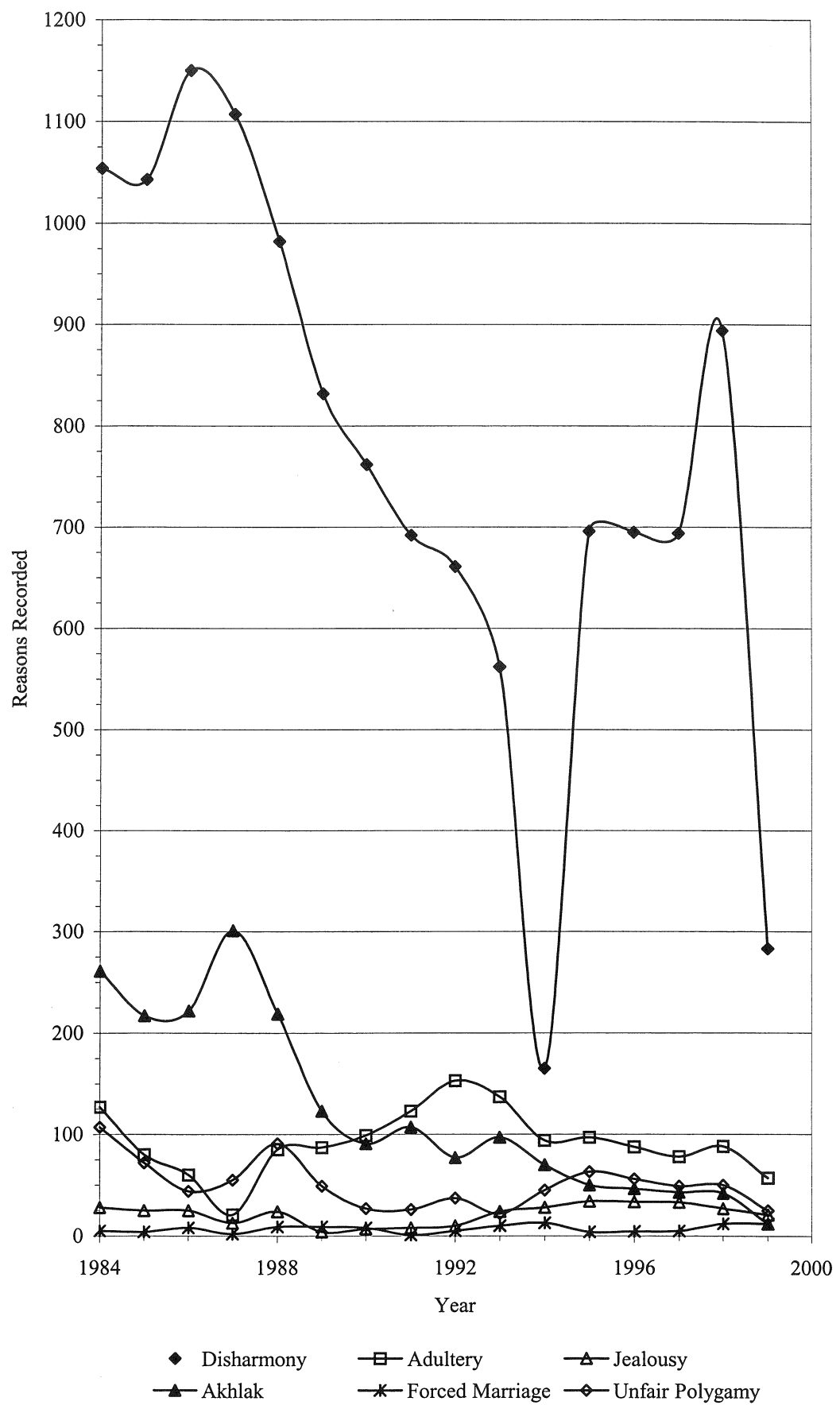
The following graphs categorise the reasons given for filing for divorce into two parts: pragmatic and moral reasons. The pragmatic reasons are filed if one of the married couple violate *explicitly prescribed* or *forbidden* marital behavior as demanded of their religion; in Aceh this is generally Islamic marriage law. Of course, in practice, people often confuse one reason with the other. In some cases, people prefer the “less vulgar” reasons. For example, while some people may file for divorce using economic reasons, most people prefer to use the “irresponsibility” reasons. The last thing any ex-spouse wants is to be branded as the materialistic partner in the marriage. Similarly, people are far more reluctant to describe physical abuse outright and prefer the more ambiguous irresponsibility reasoning. It is for these grounds that the pattern for the three reasons used for filing a divorce are similar.

Graph 3.2.  
Pragmatic Reasons Filed for Divorce in Aceh



\* Include spouse imprisoned or having biological handicap, and divorce for political purposes.  
Source: Compiled from BPS data.

Graph 3.3.  
Moral Reasons Filed for Divorce in Aceh



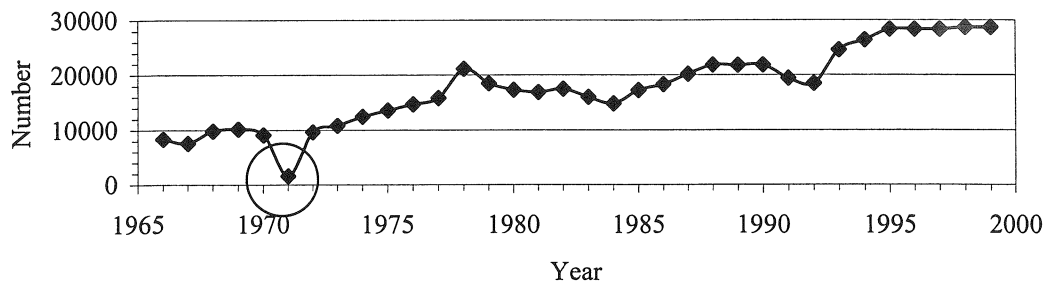
Source: Compiled from BPS data.

The moral reasons category includes reasons for divorce based on behavior that – despite not being prescribed clearly by religious texts – is frowned upon by the public in general and may cause significant embarrassment. It is a category far more ambiguous than the pragmatic ones and often open to strategic interpretations. For example, a wife cannot file for divorce on the basis of irresponsibility if her husband never failed to fulfill all his economic obligations and never physically abused her. However, she can file for divorce on reasons of adultery (if he did), jealousy (still open for the reconciliation option) or disharmony.

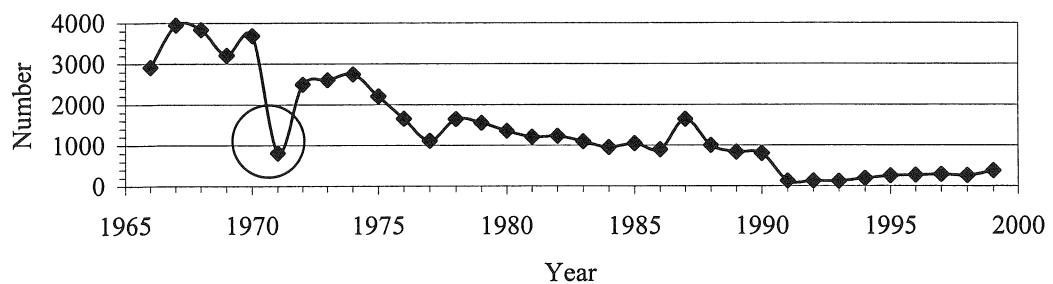
The graphs above showed that the major reasons used in filing an official divorce (irresponsibility, disharmony and *akhlak*) are all open to interpretations, meaning that they are reasons that can easily be debated, negotiated and open the possibility of reconciliation. As explained earlier, in Islamic law there are several stages before a married couple can truly be divorced. In Indonesian Islamic court the process of filing for divorce is called *thalak*, which must be undergo three times before the divorce is considered final. Every time a *thalak* is filed, the married couple is urged to resolve their differences with the hopes that they will reconcile. But if the third *thalak* is filed, then the divorce is final and the couple is no longer married.

Graph 3.4.  
Marital Cases Filed In The Acehese Religious Courts 1966-1999

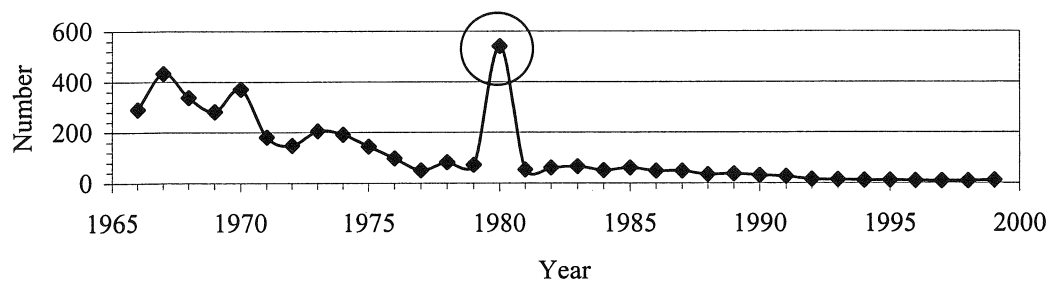
Graph 3.4.a.  
Marriages



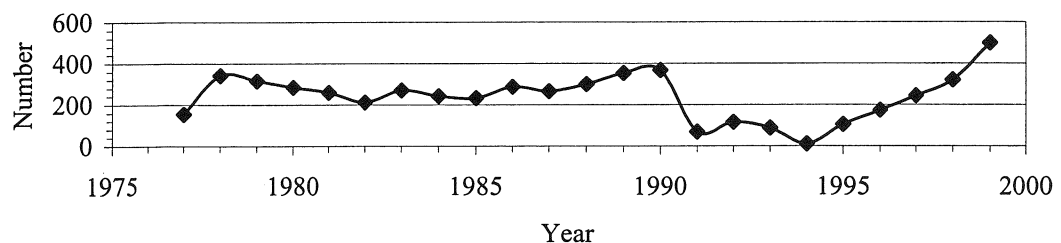
Graph 3.4.b.  
Thalak (Include First, Second, and Third Thalak Filed)



Graph 3.4.c.  
Reconciliation (After First and/or Second Thalak)



Graph 3.4.d.  
Divorce Granted (After Final or Third Thalak)



Note: ○ Circled point (steep slopes and peaks) indicates that the number is in doubt (see Introduction).

Source: Compiled from BPS data.

The high number of *thalak* is mainly due to domestic troubles, especially first *thalak*. Couples are far more reluctant to file for a second *thalak* as it usually leads to a third and final *thalak*, which is the actual divorce. Families of the quarreling couples usually work hard to reconcile them. The number of reconciliations filed for in the religious courts are mostly cases where the second *thalak* has already been issued (this is also the reason why the official reconciliation numbers are low compared to *thalak* numbers).

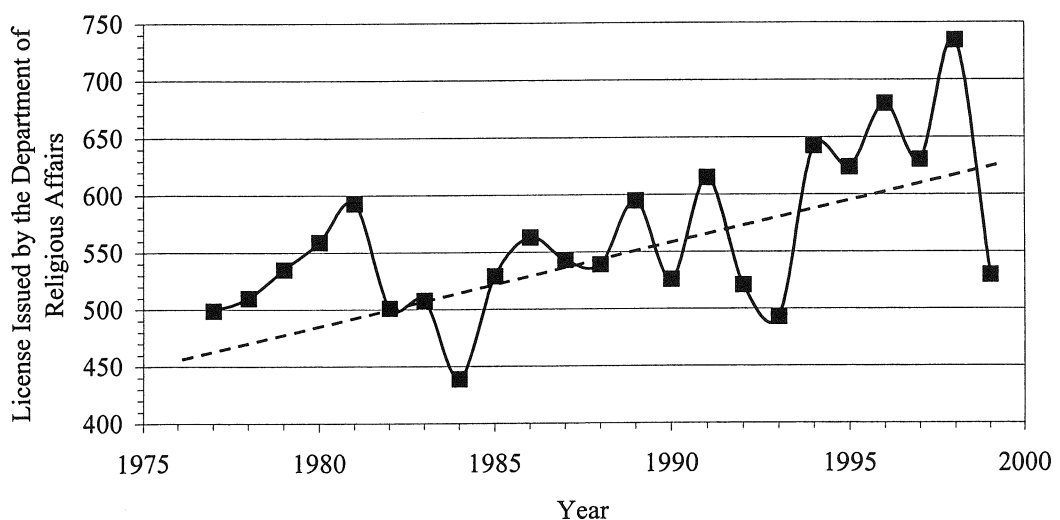
These charts show that while each year the number of marriages has increased (peaking around 1995) and the number of divorces filed has slowly risen in the last decade, there is a significant drop in the number of *thalak* efforts as well as reconciliations of marriages. Marriage and divorce have become a clear cut either/or affair. This is quite an improvement for women as men can no longer practice what is called *kawin gantung* (suspended marriage) where the husband neglects the wife yet she is unable to initiate a divorce and thus the possibility to remarry. Women can now bypass the *thalak* procedure – which generally sympathetic towards the husband as well as favouring reconciliation (often by any means) – and simply file for a final divorce through the government courts. The marriage law of 1974 further discourages people – though not drastically – from initiating *thalak* due to complicated (and expensive) bureaucratic procedures (Mustadjib, 1977).

The reasons for these trends remain unknown. Several possible explanations range from people's increasing distrust in state control of the marriage institution, the growing inadequacy of the necessary bureaucracy

and infrastructure regulating marriages, to the possibility that marriage has lost its appeal. After all, divorce still remains a shameful status especially among rural women. They would rather be separated from their spouse than have to endure an “official divorce” which would involve other family members, friends and kin. In Aceh, one does not marry just a person but an entire family or even a village. These trends can also be explained by the fact that women are far more economically independent than before, they see little point in prolonging an economically draining marriage but do not want to end it by divorce.

As seen in graph 3.2, irresponsibility is the usual legal ground to initiate a divorce – usually by women – and up until 1993, the Department of Religious Affairs, which handled marriages and divorces, separated negligence causes for divorce into two categories: *menerlantarkan* (the wife neglects her duty) and *nafkah istri* (the husband fails to provide for his wife). The rights of wives to file for divorce is guaranteed by both religious and state courts in the form of *fasakh* divorces.

Graph 3.5.  
Fasakh (Wife-Initiated Divorce) Granted in Aceh



Note: - - - Projected trend.

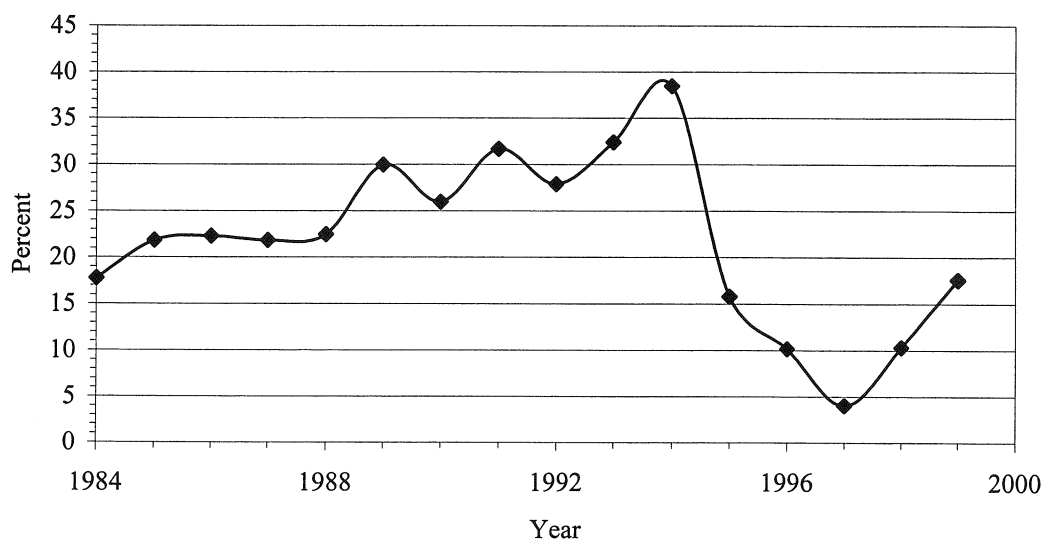
Source: Compiled from BPS data.



If we only consider the number of increase in the chart above then the level of *fasakh* has only gradually increased over past 25 years. It indicates that women are less likely to initiate divorce, probably because the status of divorced women is (still) low. A widowed woman is showered with sympathy because her situation is a consequence of "God's will" or fate, but a divorced woman is generally deemed to be incapable of maintaining a happy household. This does not mean that men are not publicly blamed, but their faults are to be *expected* whereas a woman is expected to be flawlessly better than a man. Women are seen as the civilising agents of the private sphere.

However, when the *fasakh* cases are put in the context of the total divorce rate in Aceh (see chart 3.1.), the trend is striking. When the drop in divorce cases in recent years (1991-1999) are also taken into account the trend is as follows:

Graph 3.6.  
Percentage of *Fasakh* Out of Total Divorces in Aceh

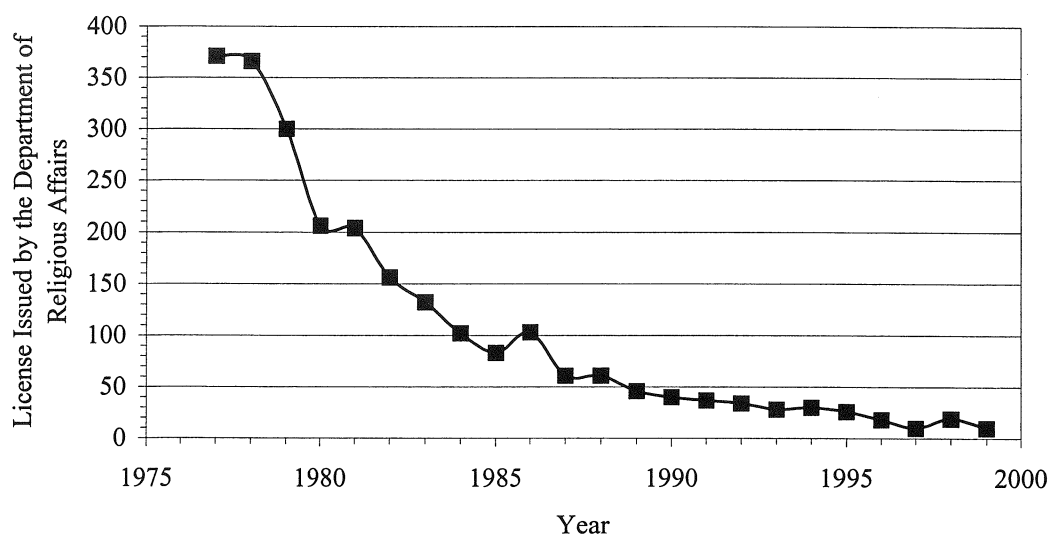


Source: Compiled from BPS data.

Since the number of *fasakh* is relatively the same, the sudden drop of percentage shown above in the mid-90s can only mean one thing: divorces initiated by men have increased proportionally.

In a more positive light for women, the rate of polygamy has significantly decreased to virtually nil (see the following chart). Both the state regulations implemented in 1975 – which require the permission of the first wife before marrying a second one – and improving women's economic status and education have led to polygamous men being seen as backward and unsophisticated, thus discouraging polygamous marriages.

Graph 3.7.  
Polygamy License Issued in Aceh



Source: Compiled from BPS data.

Unfortunately this does not mean that the practice itself has been abandoned. While civil servants do not engage in legal polygamy (a major block for career advancement), others still practice it openly or quietly. Polygamy has always been as much about the display of economic prowess and an economic arrangement for poor women. It is not surprising that wealthy Acehnese men have shifted to the practice of keeping

mistresses – and even marrying more wives – as long as they are kept far away from the first wife's household (usually in a different province like North Sumatra or the national capital of Jakarta). While I only encountered one such polygamous unions,<sup>32</sup> I often heard such accusations from women I encountered in fieldwork. The main contention against polygamy practices voiced by these women varied from perceiving it as demeaning to women, to depriving women of better economic provisions, encouraging unjust treatment of wives, and other moral reasoning. When I point out the advantage of pooling economic resources and sharing domestic chores, they responded that these are inconsequential advantages which did not prevail over the “immorality” of the practice. Of course, all of these women whom I interviewed were married (monogamous), enjoyed university education, most had jobs and lived in the city. I have yet to hear a second wife's point of view.

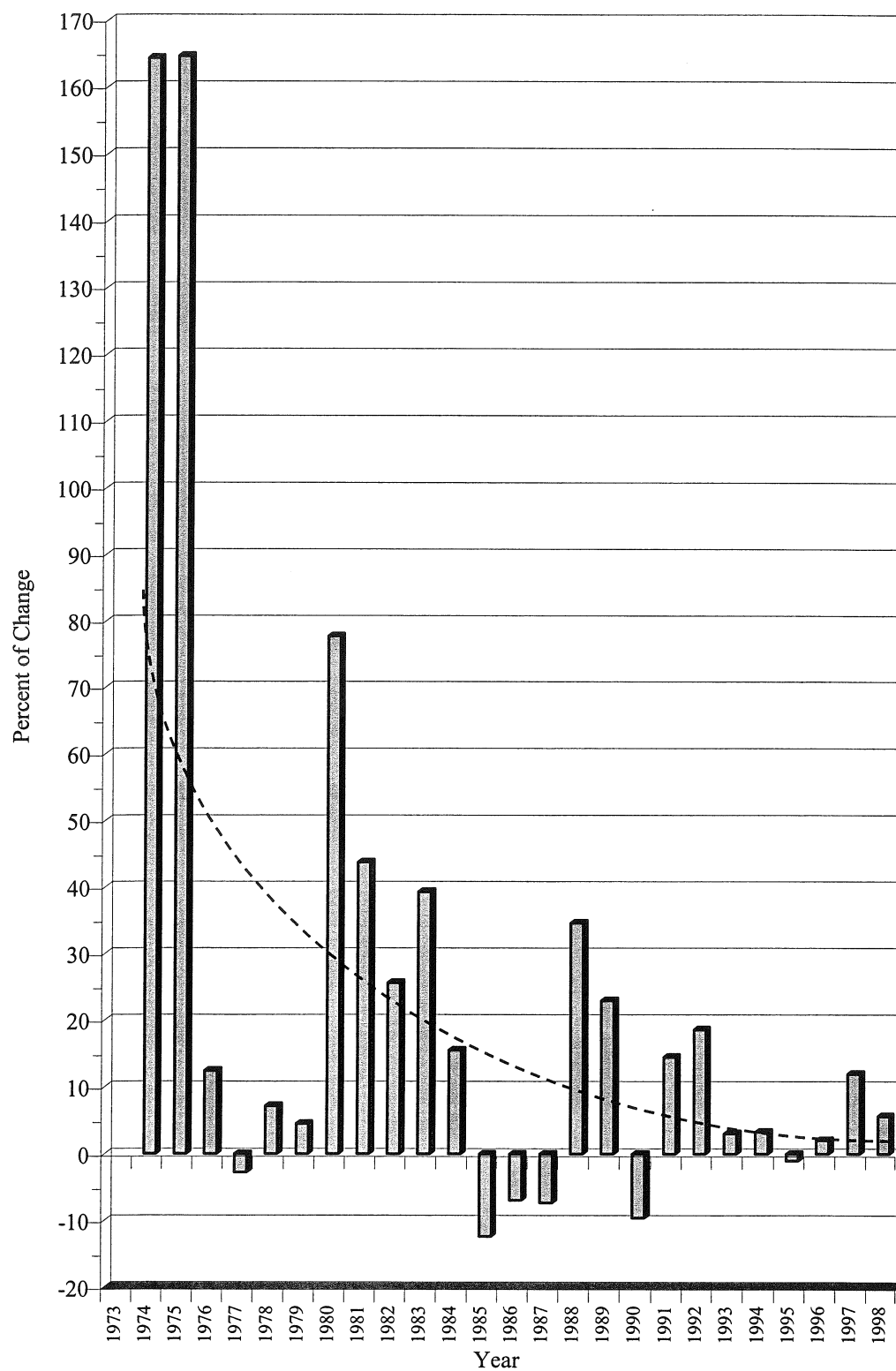
### 3.5. Reproductive Health

The family planning program in Indonesia – for better or worse – has been successful in stemming population growth in Aceh. The last census in the year 2000 surprised the regional government since the Acehnese population had increased by less than was projected.

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<sup>32</sup> The polygamous respondent in question is a travelling artist who has three acknowledged and is rumored to have more wives. They all live in separate houses, two of them in Aceh. Each wife raised her children in her own household.

Graph 3.8.  
Growth of Contraceptive Use in Aceh

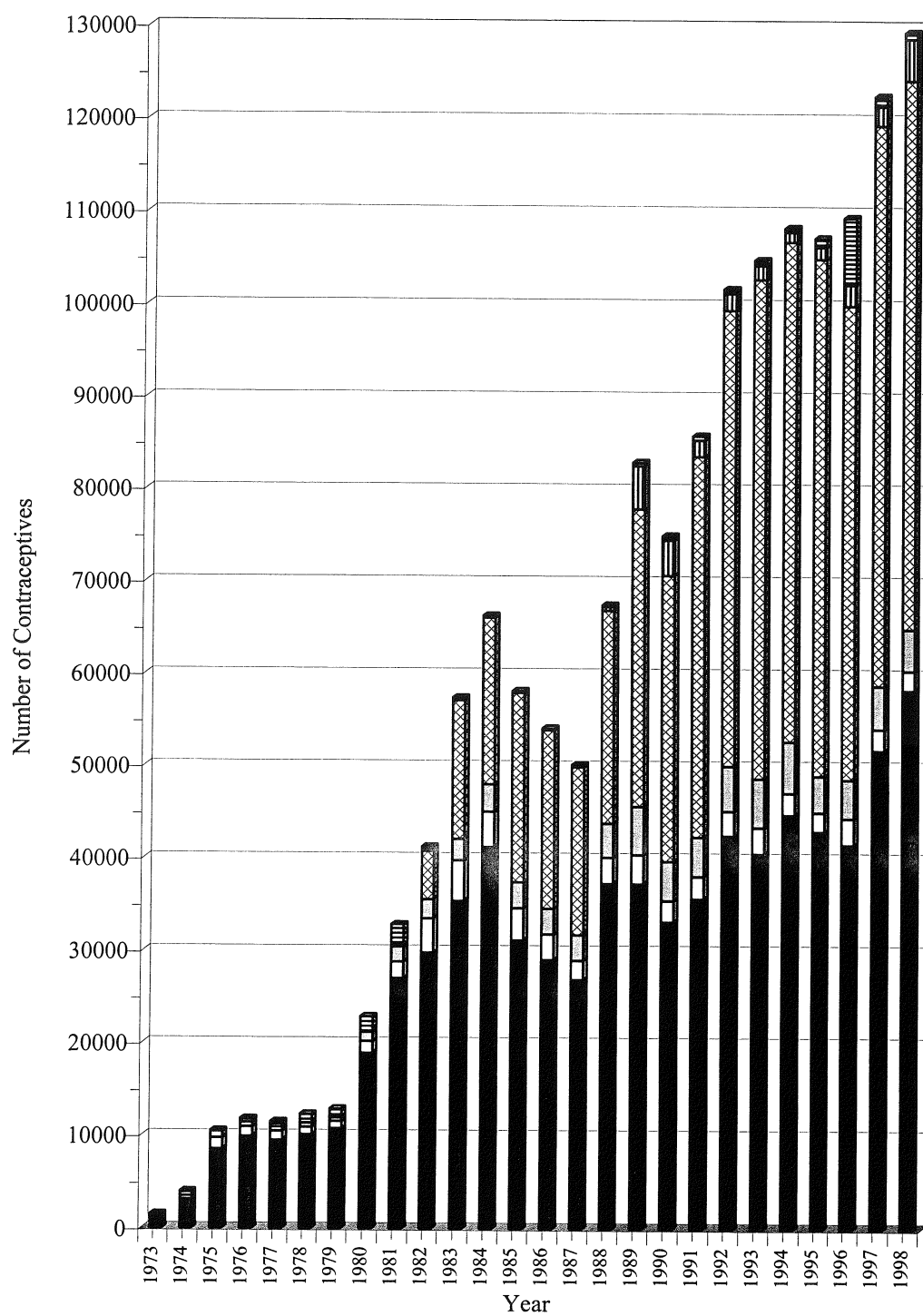


Note: - - - - Projected trend

Percentage in a year is the change compared to previous year

Source: Compiled from BPS data

Graph 3.9.  
Use of Contraceptives in Aceh



Source: Compiled from BPS data

Looking at the graphs above gives a quick insight into the prevailing attitude among men and women regarding birth control. Male participation in family planning remained low mainly because of government policy that target women and not men. Graph 3.8. shows that the rate of growth for all contraceptives is slowing down. However, at the same time graph 3.9. shows that the increase in female contraceptive use – particularly through the use of the pill and injections – is not matched by the male contraceptive use. Acehnese women are taking matters of family reproduction and family size more seriously. The result of the year 2000 census was not therefore totally unexpected. While still far away from the prescribed level encouraged by the UN, women in Aceh are engaged in tackling the issue of reproductive health and population control. Recent changes in government policy on family planning have aimed to involve men more than before. Whether this will be successful remains to be seen.