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Acehnese Culture(s): Plurality and Homogeneity.

by Susanne Schröter

Introduction

Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam is a multicultural province within a multicultural state. Hence, its political leaders not only face the need to integrate ethnic and cultural diversity into a regional framework, but also have to define Aceh's role within the Indonesian nation. During its violent past which was characterized by exploitation and military oppression, there were good reasons to emphasize sameness over diversity and to build up the consciousness of a unified Acehnese identity. From both an emic and an etic perspective, it is today widely accepted that there is such a thing as a homogeneous Acehnese culture which is rooted in a glorious, though troublesome, history of repression and rebellion and shaped by a strong Islamic piety.¹

Even if it is true that Acehnese history has created a strong regional identity, it must not be forgotten that people living in this area belong to various ethnic and cultural groups and that they represent a rich variety of different cultures rather than simply a single homogeneous culture. As a matter of fact, the practises and discourses of Islam here also vary depending on the cultural background of the people. As elsewhere in Indonesia and beyond, world religions have to adapt to local customs, have to be appropriated by the local people, and have to be indigenized. This is the reason why *adat* still continues to play a role in every local context, even if it has been treated with suspicion in many parts of Indonesia since the Dutch colonial administration began using it as a counterforce against Islam in order to implement their divide-and-rule strategy.

With this article, I wish to shed some light on the complexities of Acehnese culture, as it encompasses numerous very distinct local cultures and this reflects on the general significance of culture for the construction and reconstruction of post-tsunami Aceh.

¹ To a certain degree, contemporary Acehnese identity had been constructed as an anti-Javanese identity. However, even if we take some anti-Javanese riots into consideration, Aceh has never experienced the sort of ethnic clashes that took place in Kalimantan or the Moluccas, where ethnic and religious conflicts at the turn of the century claimed the lives of thousands.

Writing on Acehese cultures is not easy due to a lack of reliable written sources for the post-colonial era. Colonial Aceh, however, is quite well documented. Until the middle of the twentieth century, Aceh's cultural landscape was described in detail by travellers who put their experiences to paper and by members of the colonial administration who wrote on indigenous cultures and languages;² most notable among these are the brilliant ethnographies written by Snouck Hurgronje³. Thus, there is quite an excellent stock of colonial anthropology. More recent or contemporary empirical data, however, is rare. This is partly due to the war between the separatists and the Indonesian military that has been ongoing for the last thirty years and the very limited number of research permits that have been granted to foreigners. The difficult political situation and the high risk has discouraged all but a few anthropologists to conduct fieldwork. Therefore, it is not surprising that the culture of the people of Aceh receives no mention, even in volumes on North Sumatra.⁴ On the other hand, ethnographic reports are available for the Gayo of Central Aceh, the Alas of the Alas Valley, and the so-called Acehese, who consider themselves the original inhabitants of the area.

Multicultural Aceh

Aceh was first mentioned in Chinese annals dating from the Liang Dynasty in the 6th century AD. These refer to a Buddhist polity named Po-li, which existed in North Sumatra. Hinduism arrived in the 7th and 8th centuries, followed by Islam one hundred years later. Marco Polo, who reached Sumatra in 1292, chronicled a state named *Peureulak (Perlak)*, which he described as inhabited by Muslims. The Portuguese called the region which they entered in the sixteenth century *Achem*, and the Dutch changed it to *Achin*. Both peaceful and bellicose cultural contacts have left their marks on the population, whose physical features bear lasting testimony to the intercourse that has taken place between Europeans, Indians and Arabians. Acehese are proud of their mixed cultural heritage, and people still pass on their awareness of their foreign descent to their offspring.

² Among them Beets (1933), Bernhard (1904), Broersma (1925), Jacobs (1894), Jongejans (1939), Kennedy (1935), Kreemer (1922/23), Lekkerkerker (1916), Loeb (1935), Palmer van den Broek (1936), Vorrhoeve (1955) and Zentgraaff (1938).

³ These extensive monographs on the Acehese (1893-94) and the Gayo (1903) are still discussed by contemporary anthropologists.

⁴ It is symptomatic that there is only one contribution on Aceh in a volume on "Cultures and societies of North Sumatra", which was published in 1987.

Because of its position in international trade and because of its being the source of valuable agricultural products, such as pepper, the region has for centuries been a destination for temporary or permanent migration, and it continues to attract migrants to this day. Apart from the previously mentioned settlers from South and East Asia and from India and Europe, there has also been migration from within the archipelago, particularly from Nias⁵, Minangkabau and Batak.⁶ Most of these migrants have mixed with the local population and have been indigenized. Descendants from Nias who married autochthonous partners are now called the *Kluet* and live in South Aceh, while the descendants of Minangkabau settlers from West Sumatra, who moved to the south-west⁷, are referred to as the *Aneuk Jamu* or *Aneuk Jameu* a designation that means “child of a guest” and, thus, recalls their foreign origin. Migrants from East Sumatra came to form yet another new ethnic group, the Tamiang.⁸ Javanese settlers dwell in Central and East Aceh and Chinese merchants live in urban communities and both have retained their pre-migration identities. Two of the biggest ethnic minorities⁹ - the Gayo¹⁰ and the Alas¹¹ - are of Batak, mainly Karo Batak, origin and came to settle in the Barisan Mountains.¹² Generally, ethnic minorities inhabit the rather sparsely populated mountain areas, while the Acehnese, who constitute the largest ethnic group, dwell in the fertile lowlands of North and East Aceh.

The Acehnese

The Acehnese number about 4 million and they emphasize how their physical appearance shows some Arab and Portuguese heritage.¹³ Their language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian strata and is closely related to the Cham language of Cambodia. Their economy relies on rice cultivation¹⁴, the growing of cash crops (like

⁵ Most people from Nias came as slaves.

⁶ Cf. Lebar (1972, p. 15), Loeb (1935), and Siegel (1969).

⁷ In Aceh Selatan, Aceh Barat and Daya

⁸ The district in which they live is called Aceh Tamiang.

⁹ The second biggest group, the Tamiang Malay, who make up nine per cent of the population, live in the lowlands.

¹⁰ These make up ten per cent of the population.

¹¹ They comprise two per cent of the population

¹² The Gayo dwell in Aceh Tenggara, Aceh Timur, Aceh Meriah and Gayo Lues; the Alas live in Aceh Tenggara.

¹³ Portuguese origin is ascribed to the so-called “blue-eyed Acehnese” in particular.

¹⁴ However, the amount of rice grown in Aceh is not sufficient to feed the population and Aceh still relies on imports.

coffee), fishing and trade the latter formerly (together with pepper) being the source of wealth and social stratification in Aceh. Historically they formed a unique socio-political system composed of four distinct groups, between whose a precarious power balance existed. Most interesting was the group called the *uleebalang* merchants who controlled the trade between the Acehnese cash-crop-producing¹⁵ areas and the outside world.¹⁶ Their income was derived largely from taxes¹⁷ or from entrepreneurial activities. The *uleebalang* tried to use their wealth to gain political power, but their attempts were hampered by the dominance of the court and their lack of ties to the peasantry. Because they derived their livelihood from entrepreneurial profit and taxes and had no alternative way to assert their status other than by violent means, the *uleebalang* came to be viewed by others as infamous parasites and tyrants who exploited the people. Later, they were also accused of collaborating with the Dutch colonialists.¹⁸ A second power group was the court. The sultan restricted the *uleebalang's* autonomy,¹⁹ tried to benefit from their income, and competed with them to control trade. While the court only gradually succeeded in exacting tribute from them, it did manage to break their control of foreign commerce. A third influential group was the *ulamas* religious teachers who had separated themselves from their village of origin at an early age to pursue an education at an Islamic boarding school called a *dayah*²⁰. As is well known, it was the *ulama* who had led the anti-colonial struggle. The majority of Acehnese, however, did not belong to any of these groups. They were peasants - small landowners who lived off their land. Furthermore Acehnese society was and is still primarily based on kinship and locality, but in the modern urban context, increasingly also on the nuclear family. Villages (*gampong*) are composed of several related kin groups and lead by a religious authority (*teunku*) and a village head (*keuchi*), both are technically elected but are, in fact, genealogically determined. The authority of the *teunku* and *keuchi* is limited by a council of adult village men. Several villages comprise a *mukim*, which is spiritually and administratively headed by an *imam (imeum)*. In the past, the *mukim*

¹⁵ These cash crops were mainly pepper and rice.

¹⁶ Trade outside of Aceh was dominated by Chinese merchants.

¹⁷ Siegel mentions the *wasè djalan* (Siegel 2003, p. 22) levied on roads used by peasants to transport the pepper harvest to the harbour and the *wasè lueng* imposed on irrigation channels (Siegel 2003, p. 23).

¹⁸ Cf. Reid (2005, pp. 94-96).

¹⁹ Lebar (1972, p. 15).

²⁰ In Bahasa Indonesia they are called *pasantren*.

were parts of larger territorial units which were largely autonomous and which vied with the *uleebalang* for power.

This quite elaborate economic and political structure is today cross-cut by a more simple dichotomy that distinguishes between the people of the hinterland (*ureueng tunong*) and the people of the coast (*ureueng baroh*), that today roughly follows the increasingly important distinction between rural and urban groups. In Aceh, like the world over, a modern social stratum has emerged mainly in urban centres, which have sprung up since the 1970s partly as a consequence of industrialization and development²¹ and partly as a result of expanding higher education in the provinces.

Kinship was and still is central to Acehnese social structure. It was the importance of kinship that, according to Snouck Hurgronje, underlay the practice of marrying girls off at a very young age, particularly if they were daughters of the nobility, who were forbidden to marry hypogamously.²² In societies where kinship constitutes the dominant mode of organization, marriages are the most important means of building alliances and of allaying feuds, although the latter practice is no longer common.²³ Consequently, marriage was not only a matter between two clans but affected a whole village. In addition, the principles of kinship and locality frequently overlapped, since there was a strong tendency to intra-village marriages and also to marriages between paternal cousins, even if the latter is forbidden by Islamic law.²⁴

According to Lebar, Acehnese descent is bilateral among societies living on the coast and patrilineal among societies settled in the mountain areas, while residence is generally uxorilocal. He further mentions a “perfectly symmetrical bilateral reckoning ... (and a) sharp distinction between older and younger relatives on the same generation levels” (Lebar 1972, pp. 17). Most authors, however, stress that Acehnese society is matrilineal and uxorilocal.

Thus, after marriage, a man may continue to live in his mother’s house and visit his wife, or he may reside with the latter.²⁵ Upon marriage, a woman receives from her parents a house and a piece of land, to which she has rights of usage, but does not yet formally own. After a few years, a ceremony is held that officially transfers the

²¹ Cf. Fachry Ali (1989) and Kell (1995: 46).

²² Cf. Snouck Hurgronje (1906, vol. 1, p. 296). His interpretation of this rule as particularly Islamic overlooks the widespread occurrence of hypergamy.

²³ Cf. Snouck Hurgronje (1906, vol. 1, p. 297).

²⁴ Cf. Lebar (1972).

²⁵ Cf. Sugihen (1982, p. 17).

house to her. From this point on, she is considered independent of her parents (*geumeuklèh*). With each child that she bears, her parents confer upon her additional lands. The birth of the first child constitutes the central right of passage for a woman and is celebrated in a sequence of rituals that are spread over several months and which serve to prepare her for the ardors of her role as an adult woman. Children, according to Siegel, are the most important part of a woman's adult life - these are treated with affection and leniency. Mothers fulfil all their children's wishes, particularly the wishes of their sons. Disciplinary measures are something experienced only outside the mother's home, at the *dayah* where children receive not only an Islamic education, but are also socialized accordingly. While children remain such for their mothers and are spoiled unconditionally, Islamic institutions, such as the *dayah*, inculcate boys and men with the understanding that becoming a man means following the rules.

With regard to inheritance practices, sources are contradictory. While Kennedy²⁶ claims that women inherit the house while men inherit the land, Siegel²⁷ reports that sons inherit land only if their sisters have not yet been accorded all of it upon the death of their parents. In such a case, one of the daughters will then receive the house while the remaining property will be distributed among the children according to Islamic law. The extent to which women are associated with houses is strikingly manifest in the idiomatic term for a wife as 'the one who owns the house' (*njang po rumah*).²⁸ Ideally, the houses of women and their daughters are located next to each other so that the village centre is typically made up of matrilineal clusters. Women live their entire lives together and comprise a socio-economic cooperative unit.

Gender segregation structures Acehnese society in several respects. Boys are separated from the maternal household at an early age and reside in the *meunasah* - a community centre which serves both as a meeting point and a place where the youth are educated in reciting the Qur'an. Boys often remain in the *meunasah* and spend their lives exclusively among males. Upon marriage, a man is only loosely connected to his maternal kin group, but at the same time, he will not be integrated into his wife's family.²⁹ However, he does have economic obligations to fulfil towards them. As long as the wife has not been separated from her mother, he should

²⁶ Cf. Kennedy (1935).

²⁷ Siegel (2003, p. 139).

²⁸ Cf. Siegel (2003, p. 51).

²⁹ Cf. Siegel (2003, p. 54).

contribute gifts to both her and her parents. Once she has formally been accorded her own land, it is expected that she provides for herself. As the father, a man is merely obliged to make a contribution to providing for his children. The lightness of his responsibilities is a consequence of men's poor economic capacities. Therefore, men are expected to leave their families and go to another village, province or island, in order to earn money – in the past, as workers on pepper plantations or as traders. This practice is called *merantau* - an enterprise that can last for years or, even, for a lifetime. Siegel mentions that in Pidie, where he did his fieldwork, men who had been engaged in the coffee trade visited their families only for the month of Ramadan.³⁰ The absence of males from the local community affects not only the Acehnese economy, but also their conception of masculinity and femininity. Siegel and Snouk Hurgronje both emphasise how little women were affected by the extended absence of their husbands; for the most part, women regarded men to be utterly superfluous.³¹ Both authors quote from interviews with men who felt they were little more than guests in their wife's house. Relegated to such a marginal position, men emphasize their obligation to financially support their families, for example, to finance construction on the house or to buy their daughters rice fields. The women, on their part, expect such support, even if their husbands own rice fields of their own and are able to contribute to the household's subsistence. Conflicts between couples generally amount to squabbles over money. Women expect their husbands to give them the money they have earned while working abroad and treat them with respect until the money is spent. At that point, they pressure their husbands to get out and earn some more.³² The money is not vital to the family's subsistence, since women also have rights of usage over their husband's land. Given that, Siegel concludes that men are relatively powerless in the family.³³ He writes that "although men tried to create roles as husbands and, especially, as fathers, women thought of them as essentially superfluous" (Siegel 2003: 55). More than ninety years before, Snouk Hurgronje had been under the same impression and characterized men as "guests in their wives' houses" (Snouk Hurgronje 1906, vol.I, p. 339). Generally, men have had a difficult time finding their place once they return from their *merantau* to their villages and their wives' homes. Siegel quotes one woman as saying: "He is like a child. He

³⁰ Cf. Siegel (2003, p. 141).

³¹ Cf. Siegel (2003: 55) and Snouck Hurgronje (1906, vol. 2, p. 356).

³² The whole system has recently encountered further difficulties, since men have begun to emigrate permanently and have married local women.

³³ Cf. Siegel 1969, p. 145).

walks around the house looking for something to do. Then he goes back to the road and sits on the bench with the other men. The longer they sit the stupider they get.” (Siegel 1969, p. 180). Contrary to male anthropologists, female ones stress the positive aspects of this matrifocality, even though the empirical data is the same. Nancy Tanner emphasizes female centrality (Tanner 1974: 141), while Jaqueline Siapno focuses on “gender egalitarianism”(Siapno 2002: 65) instead.³⁴ However generally, conflicts do not result primarily from a man’s insecure position in local society. Rather, conflicts arise because not only do a man’s wife and her family demand financial support, but his family of origin does so as well.³⁵ Consequently, the divorce rate is high.³⁶ For the nineteenth century, both authors agree that men carried the burden of numerous obligations and few rights. According to Siegel, Islam offers a way out this state of affairs: boys and men can stay at the *dayah* and experience a totally different cultural world. At these Islamic boarding schools, social life, values and notions on religion and gender differ from the village; in an environment shaped by Islamic values, men can derive a feeling of superiority from pursuing a proper Islamic way of life. Thus, men can opt out of their unsatisfying village role by emphasizing religious over geographic and social identity.

The Gayo

Gayo territory is located in the Barisan Mountains - a densely populated area in South-Central Aceh.³⁷ According to linguistic data, the Gayo first settled on the coast of North Aceh, from where they moved to their current home in the mountains.³⁸ They speak an Austronesian language which is close to Batak and even contains words from the Mon Khmer family.³⁹ Aceh chronicles, dating from the seventeenth century, mention them as inhabitants of the outskirts of the kingdom of Aceh Darussalam and they probably converted to Islam at that time.⁴⁰ During the Dutch colonial expansion and the Aceh War, Gayo rulers tried in vain to remain neutral but

³⁴ For further discussions on matrifocal social structures in Indonesian societies, see also: Kato (1982), Sanday (2002), and Schröter (2006).

³⁵ A similar conflict setting is reported among the matrifocal Negri Sembilan of Malaysia. Cf. Peletz (1995).

³⁶ After divorce, a man is expected to continue to provide for his children, which he often does not. Cf. Siegel (2003, p. 141).

³⁷ The Gayo live in the following parts of the province: Central Aceh, the northern part of South East Aceh, the western part of East Aceh, and small strips of northern South Aceh and southern North Aceh.

³⁸ Cf. Bowen (1991a, pp. 14-15).

³⁹ Cf. Kennedy 1935, p. 44). Their language belongs to the Mon Khmer group.

⁴⁰ Historical texts written in the fourteenth century characterize them as a people who were reluctant to convert to Islam, but obviously, they ultimately did.

finally joined the anti-colonial resistance, adopting Acehnese anti-colonial rhetoric in poems, narratives and metaphors. Particularly popular were accounts that cast the struggle as a holy war against infidels (*hikayat prang sabi*).⁴¹

Unlike other ethnic groups, the Gayo are well documented ethnographically in the publications of Snouk Hurgronje⁴² and the American anthropologist John Bowen⁴³. While Snouk Hurgronje's monograph is based on data obtained through questionnaires he sent to Dutch officials, via the reports written by military personnel and two key informants, Bowen conducted extensive fieldwork in the region.⁴⁴ Interestingly, these authors came to very different conclusions regarding Gayo social structure. Struck by the fact that kin groups occupied separate longhouses (*umah*), Snouk Hurgronje believed kinship to be the dominant factor in structuring society.⁴⁵ In his view, the ostensibly kin-based Gayo thus contrasted with the territorially-organised Acehnese. However, Bowen criticized the findings of his predecessor. According to his historical research, three elements determined pre-colonial social structure: kinship, village, and the wider community. Furthermore, he described how "each level contained a dynamic tension between two ideas of authority: descent from an indigenous founder and power from an external source" (Bowen 1991: 49). Depending on intra- and inter-kin relationships, the communities could be characterized as either tendentially egalitarian or hierarchical. In pre-colonial times, after the Acehnese expansion in the seventeenth century, domain lords were imparted their authority by the sultan of Aceh, which was represented by and embodied in the *bawar* (a ceremonial dagger). In exchange, regular tribute was paid, but the *sultan* did not interfere in day-to-day village affairs. With the coming of colonialism, Bowen saw a shift in the relationship between the two groups, from one of equality and exchange to one characterized by hierarchy and competition.⁴⁶ During this time, political authority was strengthened and social divisions intensified.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Cf. Bowen (1991a, p. 67).

⁴² Cf. Bowen 1991a, p. 36).

⁴³ Cf. Bowen (1988, 1989, 1991a and b, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1997, and 2003).

⁴⁴ To be specific, his empirical research was conducted in the village of Isak - a community of 1,000 people who, into the 1970s, engaged primarily in wet rice cultivation, but who since the late 1980s have also begun to grow coffee and other crops in the mountains thanks to improvements in the local infrastructure.

⁴⁵ Cf. Snouk Hurgronje (1903, p. 131).

⁴⁶ He examines this together with an analysis of poetic discourses. Cf. Bowen (1989).

⁴⁷ For a detailed analysis of Gayo historical development and cultural changes see Bowen (1991a).

Today, the Gayo number some 200,000 people. Ethnically, they have strong ties to the Karo Batak, who were their slaves in pre-colonial times and were considered to be non-Muslim Gayos of sorts. Many subsequently converted to Islam after slavery was abolished by the Dutch, married Gayos and became integrated into the local population. Apart from the Gayo, the region is also inhabited by Javanese and Chinese migrants. The Javanese came to the Gayo hills during colonial times in order to work on the dammar pine estates. Today, their descendants dwell in “Javanese” villages near the capital city, Takèngon, which is situated at the edge of Lake Tawar, and is inhabited by about 21,000 people. As is characteristic of peoples living in a diaspora, they have retained their distinct cultural identity, kept the Javanese language and retained their agrarian way of life. Takèngon is a multi-ethnic city in which the Chinese dominate commercially. The Chinese own shops, but often do not speak Gayo. The city’s multi-ethnic make-up, which Bowen characterized as an “intermingling” rather than a “blending”, has made urbanized Gayo more ethnically self-conscious, but has also made them more at ease than other ethnic groups with respect to the Indonesian language and culture.⁴⁸ Bowen describes the town as modern and, since the 1920s, as increasingly “Indonesian”.⁴⁹

In 2000, interethnic conflicts occurred between Acehese coastal people and members of the so-called Jago.⁵⁰ A further source of tension was the income inequality between the local population and Javanese transmigrants who had arrived on the east coast between 1960 and 1980 and then settled in central Aceh. The latter had received land and money to aid in their settlement and often found work on the palm plantations and in firms that serve as suppliers to the gas industry. The ease with which these Javanese migrants were able to enjoy relative economic success thus left the indigenous Gayo with the impression that they had been short-changed.

Kinship is the locus of social organization and considerable importance is accorded to “choosing the correct form of interaction” (Bowen 1991, p. 23) in the kinship network, which predicated on adequate knowledge of modes of kinship. Kinship is conceived of in two ways: through uxori-local ties and viri-local ones. The latter are assumed to be the stronger, and the transmission of land through a line of

⁴⁸ Cf. Bowen (1991a, p. 17).

⁴⁹ Cf. Bowen (2003, pp. 32-33).

⁵⁰ Jago is the short form of Java-Gayo.

genealogically-related men is a symbol of strength.⁵¹ Since formal rules allow men and women equal access to property, this becomes a source of intra-village conflict when, in practice, men gain certain advantages.⁵² Generally, descent is traced through the male line, while spiritual and magical powers (i.e. healing abilities) are passed on through the female line. The divorce rate is high and even increased during the economic crisis in the late 1990s. Villages are managed by headmen, the secretaries to the headmen and the *imem*. The primary social unit in pre-colonial times was the *sarak opt* - a settlement of related individuals who were represented by a local ruler (*reje*) of limited authority.

The Gayo speak of four “debts” they have to their children: naming and introducing the baby to the natural and social world on the seventh day after birth, the provision of education (meaning an Islamic one) and regular schooling, circumcision of the boys at the age of five and subincision of the girls at one or two, and finally marriage, which constitutes the threshold to the world of adulthood.

The impact of world religions on local cultures always leads to tensions and challenges local actors to redefine their own customs. This is particularly true in cases where purist or revivalist movements occur. In the early twentieth century, the Gayo area witnessed the rise of such a movement, called the “young group” (*kaum muda*), which was inspired by scholars from the Middle East and spread to the Gayo hills, carried by migrants from Aceh and Minangkabau. The movement sparked controversy over proper religious practice, which became particularly heated over the custom of using Qur’anic verses for rituals related to ancestor worship. As Bowen argues, unlike the Acehnese, pressure was high on the Gayo to make their *adat* consistent with Islam, since they continued to rely heavily on local kin networks. Even the most modern Gayo could not conceive of a life wholly detached from the village.⁵³ In order to reconcile the demands of Islam with local practices and beliefs, they distinguished between religion and the demands of daily life, and accordingly played down the meanings implicit in these ceremonies.⁵⁴ Also common was to embed the significance of practices in Islam by means of exegesis or contextualization. Thus, people explain their local ritual practices by referring to

⁵¹ In Bahasa Indonesia, this is called *turun-temurun* (coming down one after the other).

⁵² Examples are given in Bowen (2003, pp. 35-37).

⁵³ Cf. Bowen (2003, p. 37).

⁵⁴ For further discussion on this problem, see Bowen (1997).

Islamic texts or link them to Islamic traditions more generally. This has allowed Gayo Muslims to continue believing in local spirits and in saints and to practise rituals to appease them or beg them for help.⁵⁵

The Alas

The Alas, also known as the *Urang Alas* or *Kalak Alas*, live in the Alas River Valley in the district of Southeast Aceh (Kabupaten Aceh Tenggara). They number approximately 70,000 and are descendants of immigrants from other parts of Sumatra, particularly the Batak region. This is supported not only by oral tradition, but also by linguistic data. Like the Gayo in pre-colonial times, they were subjects to the *sultan* of Aceh and had, by the seventeenth century, converted to Islam. In the capital, Kutacane, the commercial elite was comprised of Batak, Malays and Minangkabaus. In 1903, the Dutch conquered the area in a bloody campaign which claimed the lives of between one quarter and a third of the male population.⁵⁶

Up until the middle of the twentieth century, the Alas lived in longhouses of varying size. In the village of Batu Mbulan, for example, it was reported, in the mid-nineteenth century, that twenty-four families lived in one single house, while other longhouses harboured far fewer people.⁵⁷ Each patrilineal nuclear family had its own hearth. Such longhouses, however, are a thing of the past. Today, the Alas build smaller houses, often with corrugated sheet iron roofs, in which separate rooms provide a degree of intimacy. Until the birth of their first child, couples generally reside in the house of the husband's father; after that, they build a separate house in the husband's village. Oftentimes, though, these houses stand wall-to-wall next to each other and are internally connected by a door. Most of the homes studied by the Japanese anthropologist Akifumo Iwabuchi housed only two generations of at most twelve persons. Residence, however, is conceived of rather loosely and leaves ample room for personal preference and economic necessity. Adults may live temporarily on their rice fields, youths often sleep at the homes of their friends or girlfriends and older boys commonly spend the night in unused rice storehouses or in community halls.

Relations between the sexes are structured hierarchically and subject to the principle of male dominance. This hierarchy is not only manifest in the terms of address

⁵⁵ Cf. Bowen (1991a).

⁵⁶ Cf. Reid (1969, pp. 187-188).

⁵⁷ Iwabuchi (1994, p. 88).

between married couples, but also in the fact that women must walk behind their husbands or brothers and in how men and boys enjoy a number of daily privileges such as eat first, while women and girls eat in the kitchen whatever the men have left. Formally, households are headed by the oldest male member, who is designated the *kepale rumah tangga*. For the most part, women are not visible in the public sphere and do not participate in rituals.

Gender-specific socialization begins at around the age of five, when boys begin to orient themselves towards their fathers or other male relatives, while girls begin to assist their mothers, older sisters and aunts with their daily tasks. At this age, the children are also circumcised, although female subincision receives far less ceremonial attention. Through marriage, individuals attain adult status and customarily at some point in time after the marriage, the father will perform a special ritual for his son that is known as the “separation from the parents”. The young man receives a number of useful objects, including a rice pot and a pan, which symbolize his independence. Iwabuchi describes the relationship between fathers and sons as potentially problematic, especially when men divorce their wives and the sons side with their mothers.⁵⁸ Relations between siblings are usually very close and highly emotive, but are also subject to the hierarchies dictated by seniority and gender.

The Alas trace descent along the male line, although, according to Iwabuchi, the rules of inheritance also give rights to female descendants, who are entitled to only half of that accorded to males, in line with the rules of inheritance stipulated under Islamic law. Social organization is based on a patrilineal kinship system - the smallest unit of which is the patrilineal household. Several households comprise a lineage and several lineages a sub-clan. The distinction between sub-clan and lineage, however, is not always clear, and the local terminology indicates that it is not always possible to distinguish between the two. Depending on the dialect spoken in the area, both organizations may be called a *belah* and a *urung*. In other areas, however, only sub-clans are referred to by these terms, while the term for lineage is *jabu*. Lineage genealogy, according to the information collected by Iwabuchi, extends back between four and six generations. The members refer to themselves as *sade asal* (of the same origins), and male members of the same generation refer to themselves as *senine jabu* (lineage brothers), or as *anak jabu* (lineage children). When male and female members form close ties of friendship, these may find expression in lifelong

⁵⁸ Cf. Iwabuchi (1994, p. 111).

relations of mutual support, which are called *turang perasat* - a classificatory term that refers to a closely linked brother or sister. Lineage members are integrated into a network of obligations that come to bear not only in ritual contexts or during key phases of life, but also in daily life. Formerly, lineages also constituted strong economic units. The most inclusive kinship category is the clan (*merge*). In 1988, Iwabuchi counted twenty-seven clans - each of which was known by its own name, could trace its origins back to a common ancestor, and was subject to certain dietary prohibitions. These origin myths mention a migration from central Sumatra, primarily from the Batak area, but also a migration from India. Because of their size, clans only serve as a vague point of reference in establishing the identity of clan members. The same holds true for sub-clans.

Kinship is the central framework that organizes community life, and members endeavour to strengthen their networks through strategic marriages or adoptions. Among the Alas, both children and adults may be adopted, with the adoption of adults serving as a mechanism by which to ritually integrate individuals into the group. Marriages are arranged according to the principles of prescriptive connubium, i.e. the idea that certain marriage alliances are preferred, while others are prohibited. Preferred is a man's marriage to his cross-cousin, i.e. the mother's brother's daughter or the father's sister's daughter. The former alliance is called *ngulihken taruk jambi* (to return to the squash's vine). The bond between in-laws (*dekawe*) is strengthened by the exchange of gifts upon marriage and subsequently reactivated and confirmed periodically by numerous ceremonial obligations. In this, the classificatory mother's brother plays an important role, for it is he who has important ritual duties when it comes to circumcision, marriage and burial. Very poor families who find themselves unable to provide the required gifts for exchange and who are unable to pay an acceptable bride price, resort to an exchange of sisters, which means that a man gives his brother-in-law his own sister in marriage. This type of marriage is called *sambar gawang* (food-box exchange).⁵⁹ In this form of union the wife moves into her husband's family's house, which generally means that she must move to another village. In exceptional cases, residence may be uxorilocal, and the man moves in with his wife's family. This happens when a family has no sons of their own and needs a man to help in the fields, or when the man cannot afford to pay the bride price. However, the cost of marriage has sunk drastically in the last one hundred

⁵⁹ Cf. Iwabuchi (1994, p. 217).

years, which has resulted an increase in the divorce rate. Men take advantage of the relatively simple Islamic divorce procedure when their wives do not bear them any sons, when their children die or when they just get tired of them. Childlessness is also one of the reasons for the widespread practice of polygyny. However, beyond kinship, territorial ties also play an important role in daily life among the Alas, and the village (*kute*) is an important point of reference.

The economy is based primarily on wet rice cultivation. Other important cash crops are coffee and candlenuts, while fruits and vegetables are grown primarily for individual consumption. Land is privately owned and is also leased. Until the mid twentieth century there was a surplus of arable land, and the Alas Valley was therefore a popular destination for migrants. Under the Dutch colonial administration there was an effort to attract settlers from the Batak region; later landless Gayo, Acehnese, Singkil, Malays and Javanese followed. Today, land is scarce. Rapid population growth and over-cultivation have caused a radical change in living conditions. Moreover, deforestation in the mountains has led to more frequent landslides, fishing using poison and dynamite has destroyed the river fauna, and the hunting of reptiles has led to a concomitant increase in the rodent population. Iwabuchi fears not only environmental⁶⁰ and economic deterioration, but also sees indigenous culture in peril as modernity encroaches on village life and as the Indonesian language and culture permeate local society.⁶¹

Ethnic Diversity and the Building of an Acehnese Nation

Politics and Ethnicity

Aceh's multi-ethnic structure has always been an issue of political importance. Representatives of the Indonesian government tried to use the province's ethnic diversity to their advantage by strategically recruiting mainly migrants and Javanese settlers, but also members of other minorities for their anti-guerillia campaign.⁶² These recruits were armed with weapons and organized into village militias, and also recruited into the intelligence apparatus. While the central government emphasized and promoted diversity, the Free Aceh Movement insisted on the homogeneity of

⁶⁰ The focus of his criticism is the construction of a road through the Leuser National Park, which was financed by USAID.

⁶¹ Cf. Iwabuchi (1994, p. 259).

⁶² Cf. Reid (2003, p. 14), Schulze (2004, p. 43), and Sukma (2004, p. 17).

their culture. Moreover, their leader, Hasan di Tiro, did take the province's ethnic diversity into consideration: in order to legitimize his claim to being the sole legitimate representative of all inhabitants of the province,⁶³ he propagated the idea of Aceh being a nation comprised of nine ethnic groups. Thus, members of different ethnic groups were acknowledged as having been part of the movement and were also taken into account in staffing the leadership.⁶⁴

The notion of Acehnese cultural homogeneity is based on a sense of unity that derives from its former status as a well-known centre of trade and from its long history of suffering and resistance that began with the war against Dutch colonial rule and continued into post-colonial times under the banner of the Free Aceh Movement. Without a doubt, this history of suffering, oppression and resistance does more or less unify all inhabitants of Aceh. These experiences have given rise to a sense of community which has, in the decades since Indonesian independence, served as the basis for a collective identity that has been asserted against the central government in Jakarta. The push for secession and autonomy, as well as the formation of an all-Acehnese liberation movement, has been based on this sense of unity and historical homogeneity. History was, thus, strategically deployed over culture to rally all inhabitants in a common cause against Jakarta. Following the well-known patterns of ethnic construction, GAM speakers outlined Acehnese culture as fundamentally different from Indonesian culture and fundamentally incompatible: being Acehnese and being Indonesian thus became mutually exclusive commitments.⁶⁵ Generally, "Acehnese-ness" was held to be incompatible with "Indonesian-ness", and for this reason, the Indonesian concept of "unity in diversity" was rejected. The Acehnese construction of collective identity and its difference from the "Indonesian" identity has been both the basis for political demands and a strategy for popular mobilization. Political analysts and anthropologists have interpreted the construction of an Acehnese culture, independence movement and nation mainly as an effort to form an "Acehnese" ethnicity by transforming cultural values and practices into politicized symbols. Ethnicity and ethnic identity as proto-nationalism⁶⁶ have been used instrumentally both as mobilizing forces and political weapons. Since they feed off the

⁶³ Cf. Aspinall (2002, p. 63).

⁶⁴ Thus, the commander of Aceh Tengah is a Gayo, as are two of the four GAM chiefs in Tamiang.

⁶⁵ Cf. Burke (2005).

⁶⁶ Bertrand characterized the Free Aceh Movement as an example of an ethno-nationalist movement (Bertrand 2004, p. 174), while Eriksen (1994, p. 14) speaks of it as a proto-nationalist movement. Both approaches can be useful in distinguishing the particular use of ethnicity as applied to indigenous people or urban ethnic minorities.

notion of the “Other” who serves as a foil, leading figures of the GAM have turned their propaganda against Javanese migrants.⁶⁷ Particularly in the 1990s, they used “anti-Javanism” as a political strategy to build up popular support.⁶⁸ Migrants were accused of being spies for or collaborators with the Indonesian military and thus were attacked viciously. In the mid and late 1990s, attempts at anti-Javanese ethnic cleansing caused dozens of casualties and thousands of refugees to flee from northern Aceh. Similar attempts were made in 2000 and 2002 in North, East and Central Aceh.

The psychological basis for these aggressions against non-combatants was diffuse anti-migrant sentiments which existed for various reasons. Economic envy has been suggested as one such reason, since a remarkable income gap had evolved between the highly paid non-Acehnese who worked in the gas industry⁶⁹ and the local population. Transmigrants in the countryside also received financial support from the government, which stirred feelings among locals that they were being put at a disadvantage. Another common complaint against migrants was that the behaviour of these newcomers was un-Islamic.⁷⁰

Although, the strategy of drawing on widespread xenophobia, in many cases, had the desired effect, there were other cases in which such a strategy was not successful. This was so in Central Aceh, where the Gayo people had respected Javanese settlers as neighbours for generations. Many of them had arrived during the colonial period as workers on coffee plantations, others came in the 1980s and 1990s motivated by the national transmigration programme. GAM members targeted these Javanese coffee farmers in order to extract so-called “taxes”. Those who refused were intimidated, maltreated, even tortured and killed. The local population, however, did not support this behaviour. On the contrary, they declared their solidarity with the Javanese and formed ethnically mixed defence groups.⁷¹

Although “Javanism” has been equated with neo-colonialism, this notion could be abandoned easily, if no longer needed. The signing of the “Memorandum of Understanding” in August 2005 was the turning point. Since then, the emphasis on

⁶⁷ Brass (1991, p. 19).

⁶⁸ Cf. Roos (2003, pp. 27-28).

⁶⁹ This is particularly problematic in the region around the city of Lhokseumawe on the north east coast of Aceh, where the state enterprise Pertamina has exploited the gas resources.

⁷⁰ Cf. Roos (2003, p. 17).

⁷¹ Cf. Schulze (2005, p. 44).

the incommensurateness of Indonesian and Acehese culture has been rapidly waning and is being replaced by nationalist sentiments.⁷²

Local Culture in Danger?

However politically isolated it has been for nearly thirty years, Aceh is part of a rapidly changing world, where local culture responds to foreign influences, and where scraps of different cultures are adapted, appropriated and reassembled in new contexts. This process has been called “glocalization” by the sociologist Roland Robertson, in order to emphasize local agency over global hegemonies.⁷³

Today, Aceh faces contradictory developments. On the one hand, we see a rediscovery and even a revitalization of culture, but at the same time, observers have lamented the disappearance of local traditions.⁷⁴

Triggered by the presence of foreign aid workers, journalists, scientists and diplomats, cultural consciousness is growing among Acehese intellectuals and activists. Contemporary Acehese reflect on who they are and how they want to present themselves to the world. At the same time, the presence of foreigners stirs a sense of unease and raises questions as to whether they can be trusted. Particularly in the early phases of foreign engagement after the tsunami, rumours spread that members of Christian organizations had tried to proselytize locals.⁷⁵ Radical Muslims even accused foreign aid workers of having “a hidden agenda of robbing Acehese from their culture and religion” (Abdurrahman Wahid 2005).

Interestingly, such fears regarding the possibility that foreigners might be a threat to Islamic values and practices were not stirred vis-à-vis the laws and practices based on *adat*. Indonesian societies are wellknown for their ability to bridge the gap between religion (*agama*) and local culture (*adat*). Indigenization, syncretism and the creation of parallel ceremonial cycles have been some successful modes of

⁷² This finding is based on observations and interviews conducted during the celebration of Independence Day in 2005.

⁷³ Robertson (1992).

⁷⁴ Bowen (1991a, p. 93) characterises Gayo history as the struggle to redefine society and culture around the challenges of modernist Islam and nationalism. Reflecting the response to a speech he delivered at a meeting of the Jakarta Gayo community, he realizes that underlying the lively discourse on modernity is a fear that a loss of cultural values may lead to a breakdown of society and a radical alienation from their own past. Others, however, have not been so much concerned about this and have emphasized the integration of the region into the nation instead.

⁷⁵ It is not easy to prove the veracity of these stories. My Acehese interlocutors told me of having heard about these occurrences but had never met one of these missionaries. Roman Patock, however, who travelled through Aceh in March 2005 apparently witnessed them in Meulaboh. CF. personal communication.

integration.⁷⁶ Local people have felt and continue to feel that they must reconcile the demands of world religions to which they belong with their local culture. How this is accomplished varies from individual to individual and depends largely on the social stratum to which the person belongs. Usually, members of the urban middle class distance themselves more radically from *adat* than farmers and villagers. This is also true in Aceh. The task of reconciling the two encounters difficulties particularly with respect to social structure and kinship.

As anthropological findings from East Indonesia⁷⁷, West Sumatra⁷⁸ and Negeri Sembilan⁷⁹ show, a matrifocal social structure is much more vulnerable and unstable than a patri- or virifocal one. Urbanization and increasing individualism weaken local clan-based structures and existing legal pluralism. Increasingly, Islamic law is now recognized as being more important than *adat* law and more commensurable with modern life. Unlike in Minangkabau, where the integration of matrilineal *adat* and Islam is widely debated among intellectuals⁸⁰ and where both systems are recognized as central pillars of society, the Acehnese middle class stress the superiority of Islam. This seems to have led to a weakening of traditional social organisation, specifically the matrifocal structure which is already waning among members of the urban middle class.

This development is rooted in the general difference between *adat* and Islam, the former being associated with a backward insular mindset and the latter being viewed as a form of globalization, particularly in the sense of belonging to a global *umma*. In this, Snouk Hurgronje and Siegel underscore the role of the *ulama*, in particular, who distinguish themselves from ordinary villagers and even look down on them.⁸¹ Trained in a *dayah* outside of their home region, they are alienated from their culture of origin and have turned to Islamic principles instead. Asserting their religious authority, they accuse villagers of neglecting Islamic commitments and of practising

⁷⁶ I have analysed these processes for the Ngada of Central Flores. Cf. Schröter (1999, and 2000).

⁷⁷ I examined this with respect to the Ngada in eastern Indonesia, - a nominally Catholic population which became matrifocal in the early twentieth century and which is now going through a process of patrifocalization triggered by inter-ethnic marriage and urbanization. Cf. Schröter (2005).

⁷⁸ Acehnese gender structures have often been contrasted to those of the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, and there are even stories that it was frustrated female Acehnese leaders who established matriarchal Minangkabau culture in response to a wave of patriarchalism that shook Aceh in the seventeenth century. Cf. Smith (1997, p. 9).

⁷⁹ Cf. Stivens (1996).

⁸⁰ Cf. Kato (1982, p. 246), and Reenen (1996, p. 5).

⁸¹ Cf. Siegel (2003, p. 57), and Snouk Hurgronje (1906, vol. 2, pp. 31.33).

un-Islamic rites. Furthermore, they deploy a rhetoric that pits the modern and educated against the illiterate and backward in order to establish a dichotomy that casts *adat* “as the rule of the unreflecting villager versus universal Islam as a scriptural guide for the learned individual.”⁸² Yet, turning to modernist Islam has also been a strategy for resolving social conflicts resulting from the matrifocal kinship order.

The disparagement of Acehnese *adat* is all the more effective given that it has often been identified with the colonial order. Although during the early phases of colonial rule Dutch authorities did not intervene in local Islam-based legal systems, they changed their policy in the 1920s and essentially created *adat* as a means of keeping Islam in check.⁸³

Interestingly, one of the arguments in favour of strengthening Islam as a counterforce to *adat* is the role of women in society. While anthropologists like Jaqueline Siapno⁸⁴, Nancy Tanner and James Siegel view autochthonous gender relationships as rather egalitarian, even matricentric, Acehnese Muslim women activists see it as a source of discrimination against women and feel a need for action. Many of them are organized in Islamic political parties, like the Partai Amanan Nasional (PAN), and argue using feminist re-interpretations of the Qur’an for women’s empowerment.⁸⁵

Liberal interpretations of the Qur’an and emphasis on gender-egalitarian *adat* might, however, succumb to recent developments related to a resurgence of fundamentalist Islam. In 1999, the Aceh Council of Ulama issued a *fatwa* stating that Islamic dress for women should cover the whole body except for the face, hands and feet. In their legal finding, the *ulama* were supported by leaders of the Free Aceh Movement, who also required women and girls to be veiled. Violence against unveiled women began in 1999 when young men threatened those who were not dressed “properly” and, in some cases, even shaved their heads. In 2000, Islamic law was implemented and since then, the pressure on social deviants has continued to increase. The whipping of women and the arbitrary arrests of youth by the *shari’a* police indicate that local

⁸² Cf. Bowen (2003, p. 38). He described this modernist strategy being used by the Gayo.

⁸³ Up until then, intervention in local legal systems affected mainly Java and Madura, while other parts of the colony were largely unaffected. For a brief examination of *adat* in colonial and post-colonial state politics see Bowen (2003, pp. 44-66).

⁸⁴ In her monograph Siapno stresses women’s agency in traditional Acehnese society and criticizes Western feminists’ misunderstanding of autochthonous gender relationships. Cf. Siapno (2002, pp. 181-83).

⁸⁵ They, thus, position themselves as part of a pan-Islamic feminist movement, which focuses on rereading the Qur’an and the *ahadith*. According to these women and men, patriarchy violates the principles of Islam and should, therefore, be reformed. Prominent representatives of this movement in Indonesia are: Lily Zakiyah Munir (2002) and Siti Musdah Munir (2005)

culture and its modernization, within the framework of liberal, middle-class discourse, are being endangered by this particular form of religious revitalization.⁸⁶

Apart from the rather unique problems of having to define tradition and culture in order to restructure society, Aceh faces some difficulties with modernity that are common to many other parts of the world, namely the disappearance of local languages. Throughout Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia has been introduced as the language of instruction, administration and, more generally, of modernity. It is taught at every school in the nation, and classes are consequently conducted in Indonesian. This exerts considerable pressure on local people, and today, even in villages, ambitious parents will speak Indonesian with their children in order to equip them better for their future career. Consequently, people's knowledge of their autochthonous language is vanishing. For the Gayo, this development has been analysed by Guillo Soravia.⁸⁷ According to him, the Gayo language is acutely endangered, even if one takes into account that the government programmes that have been launched in order to preserve it. Measures to protect local languages, he criticizes, exist *de jure* but not *de facto*. There are no publications nor broadcasts in Gayo and no effort is made to distribute music cassettes in Gayo. Urban areas, particularly Takèngon, are dominated by Bahasa Indonesia and Acehese - languages to which locals accord a high degree of prestige. The long-term effect of these processes is not to be underestimated, even if the Gayo do continue to use their language in daily conversation and during rituals.⁸⁸

Post-Tsunami Culture Politics

Acehnese culture has recently become a political issue. According to Hazballah M. Saad, Indonesia's former Minister of Justice and Human Rights and one of Aceh's most influential intellectuals, post-tsunami reconstruction should focus not only on the economy but also incorporate culture. The Acehese, he explained to me, should maintain their culture, learn about it and present it to the outside world. This would prevent them from losing their identity in the wake of globalization and would make them proud of who they are. In order to strengthen Acehese culture and make

⁸⁶ This has been problematized by some women's organizations, like the Flower Aceh Foundation. Cf. Kamaruzzaman (2004 and 2005).

⁸⁷ Cf. Soravia (1987).

⁸⁸ Cf. Bowen (1991a).

people aware of it, he and a group of local intellectuals had founded the Institut Kebudayaan Aceh (Aceh Cultural Institute). When I asked him what exactly he intended to accomplish with the establishment of this institute, he outlined his ideas on how local heritage could be preserved. In particular, the tsunami had destroyed a collection of ancient manuscripts which had been kept in the local museum; Hazballah felt that by demanding to have copies of these from archives in the Netherlands he could restore what had been lost and make an important contribution to conserving local heritage.

Cultural heritage is becoming a central theme in the Acehese engagement with culture today. Apart from the Aceh Cultural Institute, there are at least four more organizations which are devoted to documenting and preserving Acehese culture: the Pusat Dokumentasi Aceh (Aceh Documentation Center), the Lembaga Kebudayaan Aceh (Aceh Cultural Foundation), the international Lestari Heritage Network, and the Yayasan Komunitas Lestari Pusaka Aceh (Aceh Heritage Community Foundation)⁸⁹ which runs the internet portal Aceh Heritage. In explaining the importance of their mission, which is to promote culture, the organization declaims cultural heritage as a keystone essential to a stable identity: “The heritage of Aceh contributes to the psychological well-being, social pride and identity of the Acehese. Heritage plays a role in cross-cultural exchange within Indonesia and abroad. Identification, rescue, safeguarding and conservation efforts must begin now, during the rebuilding process” (Lestari Heritage Network). Among the objects listed as belonging to Aceh’s cultural heritage are monuments like the *kraton* complex, mosques, colonial buildings and the home of the national heroine Tjut Nyak Dhien in the Subdistrict of Lhok Nga.

Interestingly, the process of rebuilding Acehese culture has been supported and funded by foreign institutions, such as the German Goethe Institute, which is engaged in financing the reconstruction of the Province Library and which organized an exhibition on *Rumoh Aceh* in the capital Banda Aceh in 2005.

One might say that these efforts amount more to the preservation of folklore than the preservation of local culture, and in this does lie a certain degree of truth. Today’s Acehese prefer to live in modern buildings made of concrete and bricks and an

⁸⁹ The Aceh Heritage Network is part of the international Lestari Heritage Network - a section of the Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation (AWPNUC). AWPNUC was established in 1991 in Penang and links cultural organizations from East, South and South East Asia with Australia and the Pacific. (<http://www.awpnuc.org/background.html>)

exhibition reminding them of their cultural heritage will probably not change their preference for the comforts of modern life. The reality is that if they wish to work as something other than a farmer in the countryside, they would need to speak Indonesian and ideally should also know some English. As more Acehnese opt for lives outside the traditional village milieu, the clan-based social structure also seems to be becoming a thing of the past, and along with, this the matrifocal line of descent and residence system as well. However, Acehnese culture does not exhaust itself in what is shown at exhibitions in cultural heritage museums.

Selectively, this culture has even been used in contemporary politics. One of the most impressive performances of “traditional” culture was to be seen in early August 2005 - a few days before the peace agreement between the government and the Free Aceh Movement was signed. Political activists organized a two-day *Rapa’i Pase* - a peace festival that involves the beating of traditional drums (*rapa’i*⁹⁰), which originated from Pase in North Aceh. Two hundred and eighty-eight drummers engaged in a rally and toured through the capital city of Banda Aceh. This event marked the first time in decades that such a parade had been organized. In fact, most of the drummers were older men, since the skill of drumming had not been passed down to the younger generation. As this case shows, traditional culture can be revitalized and appropriated in a modern context. Even if people no longer believe that such a ritual actually can bring about peace, the ritual helped to publicize the peace effort and rallied support for the treaty to be signed. The *rapa’i* itself is, in reality, the product of cultural hybridization. According to Bukhari Daud, its origins have been attributed to the mystic Ahmad Rifa’i⁹¹ and is associated with a ritual called the *rapa’i daboh*, in which men drum themselves into a trance and supposedly make themselves invulnerable to sharp blades, like daggers or *parang*.

Using a tradition, like the *rapa’i* in a contemporary political context shows that culture is not only something that exists to be conserved by collecting folklore or by establishing museums, but can be a useful part of a modern life.

⁹⁰ A *rapa’i* is a tambourine made of wood and covered with goat skin. In the Samudra Pasa’i kingdom, the *rapa’i* was beaten to signal the people to gather. Today, it is used to accompany traditional dances, such as the *geleng rapa’i*.

⁹¹ Cf. Daud (1997, p. 256). Ahmad Rifa’i founded the sufi order Rifaiyyah which has been introduced in Aceh by Nurudin ar-Rainiri in the 17th century.

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