

## CHAPTER 2

### *Adat*, Gender, and Aceh's Performing Arts

Much like Acehese histories, Aceh's cultural traditions have been viewed as reflections of an unchanging, "inherent" Acehese identity. Within Acehese architecture, marriage ceremonies, conflict resolution practices, and the arts, for example, scholars of Aceh and Acehese themselves identify aspects of these traditions that reinforce dominant assumptions about Aceh's political and religious identity.<sup>1</sup> These traditions have also been invoked to support a particular narrative about Acehese women's roles and gender relations.

This chapter will examine popular interpretations of Acehese traditions, including dance, music, and theater practices. In the opening section I offer an overview of how *adat* (tradition) has been conceptualized within theoretical conversations and articulate my own understanding of tradition. The second section explores two Acehese traditions—the practice of *merantau* and Aceh's matrifocal kinship system—and questions the significance of these traditions for communicating particular ideas about gender relations in Aceh. Next, I turn to Acehese performance traditions. This second half of the chapter focuses on three primary questions: How have Acehese performance practices supported dominant narratives about Acehese identity? What alternative constructions of Acehese identity can be found within Aceh's performing arts? Finally, in addition to serving as a *reflection* of Acehese identity, in what other ways does

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Margaret Kartomi, "Some Implications of Local Concepts of Space in the Dance, Music and Visual Arts of Aceh," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 36 (2004); Ari Jauhari, "The Acehese Marriage" (August 28, 2008), <http://ariaceh.wordpress.com/category/ethnomusicology/> (accessed March 25, 2011); Leena Avonius, "Reconciliation and Human Rights in Post-Conflict Aceh," in *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*, ed. Birgit Bräuchler (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); and Iwan Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere: Dynamics of the Traditional Vocal Performers in the Islamic Region of Aceh from the Late 19<sup>th</sup> to the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century," (PhD diss., Monash University School of Music, Melbourne, 2006).

Acehnese traditional performance continue to hold significance for Acehnese communities today? In offering a comprehensive introduction to, and gendered analysis of, Acehnese traditions and performance, I lay the groundwork for an investigation of the role of Acehnese performance within trauma recovery, which is the focus of Chapter 3.

### **UNDERSTANDING ADAT**

In Indonesian, *adat* translates as “tradition” or “custom,” and has been used to indicate a set of social, cultural, economic, political, religious, or legal practices to which a particular group subscribes. Margaret Kartomi describes *adat* as, “traditional customs...derived from the ancestors” that “provided the cosmological order, the primary...explanation that rendered the world intelligible and informed one how to act in it.”<sup>2</sup> This view suggests that *adat* practices, which are significant for providing structure or order to social life, are considered to have roots in the ancient past and to have remained unchanged over time. In part, the belief that traditions have been continuously transmitted from past to present grants them their authority and legitimacy. Stephanie Lawson explains, “Tradition also implies a strong sense of duty and respect based on reverence for the *age-old* nature of the phenomenon...Thus the very fact that something has been transmitted from generation to generation, or is believed to have been so transmitted, enjoins acceptance of its automatic legitimacy, and is therefore deferred to without argument.”<sup>3</sup> While many Indonesians believe that *adat* practices have remained unchanged throughout history, they also consider *adat* to be unchangeable; that is, *adat* cannot be altered in the present or the future. C. Snouke Hurgronje, a Dutch Native

---

<sup>2</sup> Kartomi, “Concepts of Space,” 4.

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Lawson, “The Tyranny of Tradition: Critical Reflections on Nationalist Narratives in the South Pacific,” in *Narratives of Nation*, eds. Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 23-4.

Affairs officer and scholar who published two volumes about Acehnese culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, observes, “In contrast to the changeableness of the individual, the *adat* presents itself as something abiding and incontrovertible, with which that individual may not meddle.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite the belief that traditions are immune to outside influence, however, scholars have shown that traditions are often shaped by numerous forces, such as religion, colonialism, and political ideologies. Kathryn Robinson explains, “Social practices...cannot be regarded as pure manifestations of *adat* and are imbricated with—indeed often inseparable from—other ideological systems which also have regulations in regard to personal and social life.”<sup>5</sup> The view that traditions are not “pure,” immutable practices but can instead be reconstructed to serve particular political aims has inspired the notion of “invented” traditions. According to Hobsbawm and Ranger, “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past...They are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.”<sup>6</sup> Viewing tradition as a set of practices that is always informed by the present and exists in a

---

<sup>4</sup> C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Acehnese*, vol. 1, trans. A.W.S. O’Sullivan (Leyden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill Publishers, 1906), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

constant state of “invention” and reconstruction, Felicia Hughes-Freeland claims, “Tradition is a process, not a thing.”<sup>7</sup>

This understanding of tradition mirrors my discussion of Acehnese history, which, as I suggested in Chapter 1, can be reinterpreted and even “invented” in ways that advance the aims of particular historical actors during particular historical moments. In *Shadows of Empire*, for example, Laurie Sears argues that Dutch colonizers rewrote Javanese shadow puppet plays (*wayang kulit*) in order to prevent rebellion. Fearing that Islam could unite Indonesians in opposition to Dutch rule (the Dutch-Aceh War being a prime example), Dutch officials revised *wayang kulit* scripts to emphasize “ancient ‘Hindu-Javanese’ literary traditions” and minimize Islamic themes.<sup>8</sup> In this way, traditions offer a site for political manipulation and control. For Keith Foulcher, Indonesia’s local traditions have been manipulated not only by foreign colonizers, but also by the Indonesian nation-state. Foulcher explains, “The relationship between the promotion of a national culture and the preservation and cultivation of local, or regional cultures has been one of tension, as the state attempts to promote those cultural values and forms which serve its own economic and political interests and to prevent local cultures and languages from becoming an alternative focus of allegiance and identity... Tradition and the region are incorporated and disempowered, rather than denied, because they function to contain the foreseen excesses of ‘modern’ cultural

---

<sup>7</sup> Felicia Hughes-Freeland, “Constructing a Classical Tradition: Javanese Court Dance in Indonesia,” in *Dancing from Past to Present*, ed. Theresa Buckland (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 55.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Sears, ed., *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 76.

values and practices.”<sup>9</sup> In this view, Indonesian traditions survive only when they can be reconstructed to reflect the aims of the modern nation-state.

At the same time that traditions have been “invented,” reconstructed, and repackaged to facilitate political manipulation or domination, traditions continue to hold significance for the individuals and communities that lay claim to them. For example, cultural traditions can offer a means for cultural groups to distinguish themselves from others and to legitimate their identity. Stephanie Lawson explains, “The reassertion of ‘traditional’ ways represents a break away from the negative, usually racist, legacies of colonial rule towards the construction or reconstruction of a confident, positive, and in some senses authentic’ national identity for former colonial peoples...The primary factor in maintaining a distinctive sense of group identity is the idea of a unique national history which is expressed and narrated through the concept of tradition.”<sup>10</sup> This understanding of tradition emerges within Ari Jauhari’s analysis of Acehnese marriage customs. Though Jauhari acknowledges the extent to which outside forces have shaped Acehnese *adat*, he also claims that Acehnese marriage practices remain unique to Aceh. Jauhari writes, “Acehnese rituals display a mixture of cultural traits and influences from centuries of interaction with the outside world, particularly cultures from throughout the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian regions. At the same time, the Acehnese have created distinctive norms and traditions that reflect a unique cultural identity compared to other societies in Indonesia.”<sup>11</sup> In this way, though it is important to understand the political

---

<sup>9</sup> Keith Foulcher, “The Construction of an Indonesian National Culture: Patterns of Hegemony and Resistance,” in *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*, ed. Arief Budiman (Monash University: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 301-2.

<sup>10</sup> Lawson, “The Tyranny of Tradition,” 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> Jauhari, “The Acehnese Marriage,” 2.

uses and abuses of traditions, it is also important to recognize that “In social life what people accept as real is real in its consequences.”<sup>12</sup>

I understand traditions as both authentic representations of particular communities that appear unchanging over time, as well as fabrications, partial truths, and rewritten histories that can advance political and social agendas. Serving as a *reflection* of cultural identity, or what Thomas Turino and James Lea term an “identity emblem,”<sup>13</sup> Acehnese traditions can signify solidarity and bring legitimacy to Acehnese culture. They can also offer Acehnese communities a tool for self-representation. However, as fluctuating practices and “inventions,” traditions can also offer a site in which to *construct* identity. Traditions can thus be used to facilitate manipulation and legitimate erroneous narratives about Acehnese identity. On the other hand, traditions can also offer a space to re-imagine, critique, and reconstruct Acehnese identity in ways that serve the needs of Acehnese individuals and communities.

### **ACEHNESE ADAT**

Like many other ethnic groups in Indonesia, Acehnese lay claim to a number of cultural practices that they believe are *khas Aceh* (specific to Aceh) and are considered to have existed in Aceh for centuries. In this section I will focus on two Acehnese *adat* practices: *merantau* and matrifocality. These traditions have been interpreted in ways that support dominant views of Acehnese identity, particularly in regards to men and women’s social roles. My reading of these traditions, however, paints a more nuanced picture of gender relations in Aceh.

---

<sup>12</sup> C. K. Mahmood and S. L. Armstrong, “Do Ethnic Groups Exist? A Cognitive Perspective on the Concept of Cultures,” *Ethnology* 31 (1992): 8, quoted in *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*, ed. Birgit Bräuchler (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 100.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Turino and James Lea, eds., *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities* (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2004), 9.

### **Merantau**

Translated as “to leave one’s home areas to make one’s way in life,” “to wander about,” or “to sail along the reaches of a river,”<sup>14</sup> *merantau* (*meurantoe* in Acehnese) refers to the practice of leaving home for a significant part of the year in order to earn a living. Antje Missbach also describes *merantau* as the act of “leaving home for a certain amount of time to gather experience, learn new skills and make one’s fortune.”<sup>15</sup> Significantly, *merantau* is associated with the male gender; not only is it considered a part of men’s husbandly “duties,”<sup>16</sup> but it is also seen as a natural or ordinary experience for Acehnese men.

Although women do not *merantau* themselves, this tradition has significant implications for Acehnese women’s social roles. John Bowen writes, “Most Acehnese men spent years away from their village at study or work, in all-male settings. Women, by contrast, were at the center of village life, remaining in their natal villages after marriage, receiving houses from their fathers, and managing ricefields.”<sup>17</sup> John Siegel’s research has suggested that during the extended periods of time when women are left in their local communities, they become managers of all household affairs. According to Siegel, “In the absence of their husbands, the management of nearly all land is in the hands of women...The income from this land is controlled by women. In addition to the

---

<sup>14</sup> John M. Echols and Hassan Shadily, *Kamus Indonesia-Inggris: An Indonesian-English Dictionary* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1989), 449-50.

<sup>15</sup> Antje Missbach, “Long-distance Politics in Transition: Aceh’s Diaspora During and After the Homeland Conflict (1976-2009),” (PhD diss., The Australian National University, Canberra, 2009), 36.

<sup>16</sup> James Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 54.

<sup>17</sup> John Bowen, “Modern Intentions: Reshaping Subjectivities in an Indonesian Muslim Society,” in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatich (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 175.

return women get from their own and their husbands' land, they also receive about half the return to labor: they do the weeding and planting for which they are paid."<sup>18</sup>

There are several different ways to conceive of *merantau* in the context of Acehnese identity and gender relations. First, a romanticized account of this practice depicts Acehnese men as brave and independent adventurers who readily embark on an unpredictable journey to foreign lands in order to "make their fortune." This version of *merantau* thus supports the view that Acehnese men are heroic and self-reliant. However, Acehnese women have also been viewed as self-reliant and agentive as a result of the *merantau* tradition. The fact that women are left in charge of managing their land and controlling their income during their husbands' absence has led some scholars to believe that the domestic realm is a place of female agency and power and, in contrast, men are "powerless" within this sphere. For example, Siegel writes, "One reason for the powerlessness of men could be their prolonged absence. It is true that women must make many decisions when men are gone, but even when men are home, they have no power."<sup>19</sup> Kathryn Robinson has also observed that traveling on the *rantau* leaves Acehnese men dependent on their wives for respect and approval. Upon returning from the *rantau*, Acehnese men "can satisfy their desires and are indulged again like children," but, for Robinson, "this leaves them without authority in regard to their wives."<sup>20</sup> As a result, scholars have claimed that "Atjehnese women...reproach their husbands for their weak nature"<sup>21</sup> and that Acehnese husbands "are easy prey for their wives."<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 143-44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 96.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 178



*Analysis*

This reading of *merantau* views Acehese men as fearless adventurers abroad, but dependent and powerless husbands at home. It also suggests that Acehese women have agency within the domestic sphere. Of course, there are several other ways of understanding this tradition. For example, Siegel argues that traveling on the *rantau* was a practical journey that men made for financial reason, not a formative journey that molded Acehese men into courageous adventurers. Siegel notes, “The Atjehnese *rantau* pattern...should not be overly romanticized. It was not expected that a man go on the *rantau* in order to become a man. He ‘went to the East’...or on the *rantau*, because he had no other means of earning a livelihood. If a man could make a satisfactory income in Pidie, he stayed at home.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, *merantau* has also been identified as a tradition that the Minang and Batak people of Sumatra follow and, in this way, is not a unique Acehese practice. Nonetheless, dominant interpretations of *merantau* suggest that this tradition is a reflection of Acehese identity, exemplifying the bravery and independence of Acehese men and the self-reliance and power of Acehese women.

In my own analysis, this popular understanding of *merantau* serves several functions. First, claiming *merantau* as an Acehese practice allows Acehese to distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups in Indonesia and can be a source of cultural pride or even a source of comfort. For example, the notion that Acehese have been bravely traveling to new lands for centuries and that this practice is embedded within Acehese cultural identity can alleviate the anxieties of Acehese living in the diaspora, a point I will return to in Chapter 4. This narrative of *merantau* may also offer

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 54.

reassurance to Acehese who were forced to relocate as a result of the conflict or the tsunami.

Second, the idea that the *merantau* tradition affords Acehese women power and agency within the domestic sphere lies in stark contrast to common readings of women's connection to the home, particularly within Muslim communities. For example, Istiadah argues that Islamic discourses in Indonesia "have been in favour of men. Women are considered inferior to men and therefore must be protected by either father, husband or brother... Women's proper place is in the house and therefore, they cannot participate outside the house without the husband's permission."<sup>24</sup> Julia Suryakusuma has also observed that the role of "housewife" in Indonesia is one of dependency and powerlessness and has been depicted as women's ideal occupation within Indonesian state ideology. Suryakusuma explains, "Women are relegated to becoming dependent, 'non-productive' housewives who provide 'free' domestic labour and who, as a result, have become isolated, atomized, disorganized and deprived of political and economic power, placing them in a subordinate position to men."<sup>25</sup> In this view, women's connection to the domestic sphere is seen as a form of imprisonment, and the "private" space of the home, the sphere of reproductive labor and the family, is considered inferior to the "public" realm of productive labor.

The *merantau* tradition offers a radically different interpretation of gendered space. Claiming that women are agents and decision-makers within the home, Acehese can point to their *adat* practices as evidence that Acehese women have power and

---

<sup>24</sup> Istiadah, "Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Investigating Paths to Resist the Patriarchal System" (Centre of Southeast Asia Studies, Monash University: Australia, 1995), 6.

<sup>25</sup> Julia I. Suryakusuma, *Sex, Power and Nation: An Anthology of Writings, 1979-2003* (Jakarta, Indonesia: Metafor Publishing, 2004), 163.

respect in their domestic lives; in this way, Acehnese can distance themselves from male-centric Islamic doctrines and nation-state ideologies. Further, this understanding of *merantau* reinforces the notion that Acehnese women are exceptional in the archipelago as independent leaders, a view that is supported by the presence of sultanas and “warrior women” within Acehnese history. This reading of *merantau* thus allows Acehnese to stand apart from other Islamic and Indonesian communities.

I would like to suggest, however, that this understanding of *merantau* also serves a more insidious purpose. Though Acehnese women are positioned as agents as a result of this cultural practice, *merantau* nevertheless reinforces Acehnese women’s associations with domesticity and may contribute to the view that the home is the only “proper” or “acceptable” space for women, particularly when accompanied by conservative religious values. For Arivia and Venny, “The view still holds [in Aceh] that the domestic sphere is the only respected realm for women; this view is located within religious values, particularly in Syariah Islam.”<sup>26</sup> In this sense, traditions that suggest that Acehnese women have *agency* within the domestic realm may simultaneously imply that Acehnese women *belong* in the domestic realm.

### **Matrifocality**

A second Acehnese tradition that has been interpreted as a sign of Acehnese women’s agency is the practice of matrifocal inheritance. In contrast to matrilineal kinship, in which descent is traced solely along the female line, Acehnese adhere to a bilateral kinship system, tracing descent along both the male and female line. However,

---

<sup>26</sup> *Menggalang Perubahan: Perlunya Perspektif Gender dalam Otonomi Daerah* (Jakarta, Indonesia: Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, 2004), 10-11. Indonesian: “Masih terdapat pandangan bahwa ruang domestik adalah satu-satunya ruang kehormatan bagi perempuan, dan itu diletakkan dalam nilai-nilai agama, yakni nilai Syariah Islam itu.”

their residence and inheritance systems are matrifocal, or uxori-local. Jacqueline Siapno explains, “Residence is uxori-local (centering on the residence of a wife’s mother’s family). Husbands move to the households and villages of their wives. While this tradition of matrilocal residence may be practiced in most parts of Aceh, it is especially strong in the regency of Pidie.”<sup>27</sup> James Siegel’s research on kinship systems in Aceh gives additional insight into Acehnese matrifocal practices. According to Siegel:

Atjehese children are born in the house of their mother. The idiomatic expression for wife is, in fact, ‘the one who owns the house’ (*njang po rumah*). Women acquire a house, or at least a portion of one, at the time of their marriage. The house is a gift from the woman’s parents. From marriage until the birth of the first child, or sometimes for a period of three to four years depending on prior arrangements, a bride does not legally own the house. It still belongs to her parents, and during this period she is fully supported by them. At the end of this period there is a small feast (*chanduri*) at which it is announced that the woman is now ‘separated’ (*geumeukleh*) from her parents. She is given full possession of the house and, if the parents can afford it, a rice field as well. At the birth of every child thereafter the parents try to give their daughter another rice plot.”<sup>28</sup>

Like *merantau*, these matrifocal practices in Aceh have been interpreted as evidence of Acehnese women’s agency and power. For Jacqueline Siapno, Acehnese women’s status within the domestic sphere is an extension of their roles as “warrior women” and political leaders within Aceh’s past. Siapno explains, “From traditional aristocratic kingdoms to post-independent, post-social revolution Aceh, we continue to

---

<sup>27</sup> Jacqueline Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State in Aceh: The Paradox of Power, Co-optation and Resistance* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2002), 61.

<sup>28</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 51-52.

find powerful women who played important roles in the nationalist struggle...At the village level, we find that women occupy an equally powerful position: for example, the Acehnese word for ‘wife’ is not ‘house-wife’ but ‘*po rumah*’...meaning ‘owner of the house.’”<sup>29</sup> As a result of their firm hold over the domestic realm, Siapno argues, “It is the women who have the strongest sense of ‘place,’ of belonging and community, and an acute sense of how to ‘position’ oneself in society.”<sup>30</sup> Acehnese men, in contrast, are seen to exist in a state of “non-belonging” and placelessness, a view that is summarized by the oft-cited phrase, “Men are like guests in the houses of their wives.”<sup>31</sup> James Siegel’s research further confirms the hypothesis that men—as children and as husbands—are forever unwelcome in the houses of their mothers and wives. Siegel observes, “From the women’s point of view, the family consists of the people who occupy the house compound—themselves, their sisters, mothers, and children. Their husbands have no place, and hence no right to make decisions...Men are basically adjuncts who exist only to give their families whatever they can earn.”<sup>32</sup> Without a sense of “place” within the domestic sphere, Acehnese men, Siegel argues, have no decision-making power and, as a result, feel deeply dependent upon their wives.<sup>33</sup>

Siapno’s reading of Acehnese matrifocal practices also suggests that this tradition has remained unchanged over time and has not been influenced by other, conflicting ideologies, particularly Islamic doctrines. Though she notes that Islamic teachings position men within the dominant roles of husband, father, and “head-of-household,”

---

<sup>29</sup> Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State*, 59.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Hurgronje, *The Acehnese*, 327.

<sup>32</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 177.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

Siapno claims, “In Acehese matrifocal system, the men are relegated to a very marginal role.”<sup>34</sup> In addition, Siapno finds that this balance of power within the Acehese matrifocal system has remained undisturbed by the thirty years of separatist conflict. Siapno writes, “Loss of one’s husband, father, and other male members of the family has had profoundly traumatic consequences, not just emotionally, but politically and economically for families in Aceh...There has been a social and emotional transformation of the meaning and nature of the family in Aceh. However, I would argue that while this is true, the composition and conception of a household has been fairly resilient—they continue to be the domain of women.”<sup>35</sup>

The view that Acehese matrifocal practices have afforded women centrality and agency within the domestic sphere and, consequently, contributed to “male marginality,” has also emerged within interpretations of the Acehese marriage ceremony in which new brides are given ownership of their mother’s house. According to Jayawardena, “Men play little part in the customary wedding ceremonies’ which take place in the bride’s home...The groom’s father does not accompany him in the procession to the bride’s house, and only women, children and the bridal pair are involved in the *duduk bersanding*. The new husband stays in the bride’s house for three nights. When she is escorted to meet his mother, the groom and his father are not present. The ceremony symbolizes marriage as being effected between groups of women.”<sup>36</sup> Because the marriage ceremony positions women as central actors and agents, and men as “guests” with little decision-making power, Jayawardena claims that this ceremony is

---

<sup>34</sup> Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>36</sup> Chandra Jayawardena, “Women and Kinship in Aceh Besar, Northern Sumatra,” *Ethnology* 16 (1977): 26, quoted in Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 25.

representative of Acehese women's agency within village life, an agency that derives from Acehese traditions. Jayawardena thus views the village as "a world of women," and views *adat* as "a way of ordering life that gives women preeminence."<sup>37</sup>

### ***Analysis***

The notion that Acehese matrifocal practices offer evidence of Acehese women's agency within the domestic realm must be considered alongside several other factors. First, *adat* is not the only force that structures social life in Aceh. Although Acehese marriage, property and inheritance practices can be characterized as matrifocal, other aspects of Acehese kinship adhere to Islamic values. As a result, Acehese have also "claim[ed] to be patrilineal like the Arabs, a declaration related to their claim for preeminence as Muslim peoples in the archipelago."<sup>38</sup> This suggests that Acehese *adat* and Acehese Islam exist alongside one another, and that emphasizing either practice serves to highlight a different aspect of Acehese identity. Of course, Acehese *adat* does not simply *co-exist* with other practices; it is also shaped by outside forces, particularly the separatist conflict. Despite Siapno's view that the Acehese household continues to be seen as "the domain of women" even after the conflict, other scholars suggest that the amount of "dislocation" and relocation of Acehese populations as a result of the conflict "have undermined the local relationships that supported women's independence and authority in the household."<sup>39</sup>

Second, the existence of matrifocal practices, as with the existence of powerful "warrior" women within Acehese history, is not in itself an indication of Acehese

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>39</sup> Yulia Immajati, "Not Just an Inong: Acehese Women in the Midst of Conflict and Household Livelihood" (PhD diss., Australian National University, Canberra, 2008), quoted in Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 26.

women's agency. Jayawardena's interpretation of the Acehnese marriage ceremony, for example, suggests that because women occupy a central role in this ritual, and because men are largely absent during the process, marriage is an area in which Acehnese women have control. A closer reading, however, reveals that outside of the ceremony, Acehnese women have little decision-making power within the marriage process. According to Jauhari, "Selecting the marriage partner is the first accomplishment of the prospective groom and his family before the marriage rituals begin. An Acehnese saying goes, 'The well does not look for the bucket!' meaning that the man and his family are responsible for choosing his prospective wife. Marriage is rarely initiated on the woman's side in Aceh...A rumor that a woman chose her husband makes Acehnese people uncomfortable."<sup>40</sup> In this sense, male marginality and women's centrality within the marriage ceremony does not reflect the gendered power dynamics within the marriage process itself, a process that ignores women's desires and decisions.

The view that matrifocal traditions exemplify Acehnese women's status as decision-makers and leaders—a status that they have enjoyed since the era of Aceh's sultanas and colonial battles—is also undermined by contemporary discussions of Acehnese women's political roles. Despite the fact that symbolic figures like Cut Nyack Dhien and the traditions of *merantau* and matrifocality identify Acehnese women as powerful leaders both in the "public" realm of colonial conflict and the "private" sphere of the home, Azriana claims that Acehnese women are still unable to exercise political power within their daily lives, and "The debate about whether or not Acehnese women

---

<sup>40</sup> Jauhari, "The Acehnese Marriage," 31.



can be leaders still is not over.”<sup>41</sup> Identifying a shift in social attitudes towards Aceh’s powerful female figures of the past and attitudes towards contemporary female leaders, Eka Srimulyani also writes:

Many Acehnese men have difficulty in accepting women as leaders, even though women have played an important role historically. During the seventeenth century, when Aceh was at its zenith as a centre of trade and Islamic civilisation, the kingdom of Aceh Darussalam had several female rulers who were respected and admired. Famous religious scholars like Abdurrauf al-Singkili and Nuruddin Ar-Raniry publicly supported the rule of those queens. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some Acehnese women continued to hold leadership positions, even as local leaders or uleebalang (hereditary chiefs). One of the most famous leaders of resistance to the Dutch colonialists, Cut Nyak Dhien, was a woman. This situation seems to have changed since the early twentieth century. Now few women play a public or political leadership role, and many men believe that such a state of affairs is only natural and right. The new hostility to women playing leadership roles was dramatised recently, in late 2010, when a controversy in Bireuen, a district in northern Aceh, attracted worldwide attention. The speaker of the district legislature demanded that the bupati (district head) replace a female camat (subdistrict head) he had appointed in the Plimbang sub-district. The speaker, Ridwan Muhammad of the Partai Aceh (Aceh Party), gave as his reason that Islam does not permit a woman to be a leader. What has

---

<sup>41</sup> Azriana, “Kepemimpinan Perempuan Aceh: Di Antara Peluang dan Tantangan Lokal” (paper presented at the Aceh Women’s Leadership Conference, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, November 25, 2010). Indonesian: “Perdebatan tentang boleh tidaknya perempuan Aceh menjadi pemimpin, sepertinya masih belum selesai.”

happened to change Acehese attitudes to women leaders? And what are women in Aceh doing to reassert their leadership role?”<sup>42</sup>

For Srimulyani, the discrepancy between the symbolic role of Aceh’s historical figures and the lived realities of Acehese women is reflected in male attitudes towards women occupying positions of political power. However, Acehese women have internalized this sense of inadequacy and, as a result, they themselves lack confidence in their leadership abilities. Reporting on women’s political participation in Aceh, UNIFEM observed, “Aceh takes pride in its history of women leaders and heroines, however prevailing cultural and social norms in Aceh regard politics as a male arena. Some religious leaders espouse that women’s leadership in politics is against the codes of Islam. Few women are convinced of the possibility and value of women’s engagement in the political arena, and with little support, women rarely see entering politics as a strategic career or political move.”<sup>43</sup> For Azriana, it is Aceh’s long history of patriarchal values that has deprived women of their self-confidence and contributed to the view that Acehese women cannot occupy positions of political power in contemporary Aceh. Azriana writes:

The challenges for Acehese women’s leadership truly lie within society’s unwillingness to move away from a patriarchal culture that, for hundreds of years, has caused injustice towards women. This culture is still firmly rooted...Other challenges include women’s own lack of confidence to come forward as leaders. In Aceh, there are plenty of women who are intellectually capable, but do not have the desire to nominate themselves as candidates for [political] leadership. A

---

<sup>42</sup> Eka Srimulyani, “Inspired by History,” *Inside Indonesia* 103 (Jan-March 2011), <http://www.insideindonesia.org/feature/inspired-by-history-13011399> (accessed March 25, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> “Increasing Women’s Political Participation in Aceh,” *UNIFEM Summary Report* (May 2009), 1-2.

situation like this can, in several circumstances, support the societal stereotype about women's weakness... Women were not born and raised in a vacuum; women were born and raised in a society in which particular rules and values about women are already in place... These existing values condition women to become a passive silhouettes in waiting. Women need the courage to break free from these rules, to show society the capabilities they possess.<sup>44</sup>

While conservative Islamic beliefs and deep-seated patriarchal values have certainly limited Acehnese women's political opportunities, I argue that Acehnese traditions have also played a significant role in undermining women's status as political leaders. First, pointing to Aceh's matrifocal traditions as evidence of Acehnese women's agency can serve to mask the extent to which Acehnese women are barred from leadership roles. Viewed alongside the practice of *merantau* and the symbolic figures of Cut Nyack Dhien or Cut Meutia, Aceh's matrifocal traditions imply that Acehnese women have "always" enjoyed decision-making power; because Acehnese *adat* is considered to be "something abiding and incontrovertible, with which that individual may not meddle,"<sup>45</sup> Acehnese women's agency may be considered a timeless, incontrovertible fact.

Second, whether or not Acehnese women are in fact agents within their domestic

---

<sup>44</sup> Azriana, "Kepemimpinan Perempuan Aceh Indonesian." Indonesian: "*Tantangan bagi kepemimpinan perempuan Aceh sesungguhnya adalah ketidakrelaan masyarakat untuk keluar dari budaya patriarki yang selama ratusan tahun telah menyebabkan ketidakadilan terhadap perempuan. Budaya ini terus berurat berakar... Tantangan lainnya adalah ketidakpercayaan diri perempuan untuk tampil sebagai pemimpin. Di Aceh, tidak sedikit perempuan-perempuan yang secara intelektual memiliki kapasitas yang cukup baik, namun tidak punya keinginan mencalonkan diri sebagai pemimpin. Situasi seperti ini dalam beberapa hal bisa mendukung stereotype masyarakat tentang kelemahan perempuan... Perempuan tidak lahir dan dibesarkan dalam ruang hampa, perempuan lahir dan besar dalam masyarakat yang telah memiliki aturan dan nilai-nilai tentang perempuan, yang sebagian besarnya mengkondisikan perempuan menjadi sosok yang pasif dan menunggu. Dibutuhkan keberanian perempuan untuk keluar dari aturan ini dan menunjukkan ke masyarakat potensi yang dimilikinya...*"

<sup>45</sup> Hurgronje, *The Achehnese*, 10.

lives, Aceh's matrifocal tradition, as with the practice of *merantau*, nevertheless emphasizes women's connection to the domestic sphere. In this way, matrifocal traditions further entrench in Acehnese social consciousness the notion that the home and the family is the "proper" domain of women. This analysis offers a partial explanation for Srimulyani and Azriana's observations. When combined with existing patriarchal and conservative Islamic views, I argue, Aceh's matrifocal traditions give additional momentum to the idea that Acehnese women's primary responsibilities remain within the "private" sphere of the home. In this way, matrifocal traditions may contribute to Aceh's societal reluctance to accept women as leaders within the "public," or political, sphere.

On the other hand, the belief that Acehnese women are powerful leaders and decision-makers does not always serve to support patriarchal values or to reinforce women's connection to the home. As I mentioned in the opening section, I understand tradition as both rigid entities that signify stability, coherence and singularity, and as fluctuating beliefs and practices. In this way, these same Acehnese traditions may also inspire women to vie for political positions or encourage women to take on a more assertive role within their public or private lives. The final section of this chapter will discuss in greater detail the possibilities traditions provide for Acehnese to redefine and reconstruct Acehnese identity.

### **ACEHNESE PERFORMANCE**

My reading of Acehnese *adat* suggests that tradition, like history, can be interpreted and distorted in ways that reinforce prevailing views of Acehnese identity, particularly in regards to gender relations and Acehnese women's social roles. I have also argued that because traditions are viewed as practices that have not changed over

time, they are afforded legitimacy and authority, and in this way, can play a significant role in shaping Acehnese social attitudes. My understanding of Aceh's performing arts follows this view of tradition. Aceh's performance practices are believed to have existed for centuries without drastic modification or alteration and are seen to showcase the "inherent" or "essential" qualities of Acehnese identity. After giving an overview of Acehnese dance, music, and theater traditions, I examine how these performances have been invoked in order to support dominant notions of Acehnese identity. I also offer alternative interpretations of Aceh's performance practices.

### **Background**

Like many other Indonesian dance forms, Acehnese dance is generally accompanied by music, and Acehnese performers are skilled in both forms. For this reason, Margaret Kartomi has coined the terms, "dancer-musician," referring to "artists who are primarily dancers, but also use their bodies as percussive and vocal instruments," and "musician-dancer," which refers to "frame drum musicians who also use their bodies as percussive and vocal instruments between bouts of frame drum playing and body movement."<sup>46</sup> Acehnese dances are usually performed by a group of either men or women, and are led by a *syeh*, who plans the dancers' movements and arranges the singing parts before the performance. The *syeh* may also work with two lead vocalists, called *aneuk syahé* (lit. "child of poetry"), who, like the *syeh*, are able to create spontaneous verses. These lead vocalists bring a degree of improvisation into performances that, for Kartomi, have a "disciplined compactness and cyclical structural

---

<sup>46</sup> Kartomi, "Concepts of Space," 1-2.

redundancy,” as the dancers tend to repeat their movement pattern throughout the improvisatory verses.<sup>47</sup>

Acehnese dances have been categorized into “standing” and “sitting” genres. In the standing dances, performers move in an upright position, often moving in and out of geometrical formations.<sup>48</sup> The *seudati* dance, which has both a male and female version, is perhaps the best known of the standing dances, and for Amir, “School children all over Indonesia who have never seen a *seudati* performance have long been taught that *seudati* is *the* traditional dance from Aceh, in much the same way as they are taught that *wayang* is *the* traditional art form from Java.”<sup>49</sup> In the sitting dances, performers kneel on their knees in a tight row. In the *saman*, for example (of which there are many different versions), dancers perform interlocking movements that demand intense concentration from each member in order to achieve the overall effect of unity and precision.<sup>50</sup> Iwan Amir has suggested that the sitting dances may be the most reproducible of the Acehnese performing arts because they do not require musical instruments or other equipment, and the songs and movements are easy to learn. Consequently, *seudati* can be performed and enjoyed by non-Acehnese individuals.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike Balinese or Javanese female performers who wear tightly wrapped costumes, Acehnese men and women alike wear trousers with a loose shirt and an embroidered hat. The costumes are usually red, yellow, black, white, or a combination of those colors, which, for Kartomi, reflects Acehnese concepts of space. According to this

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>48</sup> For example, the practice of weaving in and out of circular patterns can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KRPe-OitYk>.

<sup>49</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 235-6.

<sup>50</sup> For an example of this interlocking dance pattern, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fnd2VUVeyaU>

<sup>51</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 238.

analysis, white is associated with the east, red is associated with the south, yellow reflects the west, and black identifies the north.<sup>52</sup> However, Iwan Amir has suggested that the costumes worn today are mostly the result of the post-colonial government's efforts to "standardize and glamorize" dance performances, and in the past performers would wear a farmer's shirt and a sarong.<sup>53</sup>

As the term "musician-dancer" suggests, Acehese music is also interwoven with dance performance. For example, the practice of body percussion, in which performers "produce patterns of rhythmic sound by beating on their bodies—chest, shoulders, thighs, and hands—stamping their feet, and snapping their fingers," is mostly performed as a part of dance performances, rather than on its own.<sup>54</sup> For Kartomi, body percussion is one of three sound-producing agents that Acehese recognize; the others are instruments and the human voice.

Acehese instruments are classified as "pre-Islamic" (referring to instruments that have been in practice before Islam was introduced to Aceh in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, primarily of Indian origin), "Islamic" instruments (those brought by Arab and Turkish merchants in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) and "Western" instruments, such as the *biola*, or violin.

Though body percussion is identified as an Islamic practice, which Kartomi has observed in some Spanish, Moroccan, and Middle Eastern dances,<sup>55</sup> the distinctions between "pre-Islamic" and "Islamic" instruments may not be clear, since "Over the centuries, the Acehese tolerated and combined facets of all the relevant religions in various syncretic

---

<sup>52</sup> Kartomi, "Concepts of Space," 9.

<sup>53</sup> Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere," 204.

<sup>54</sup> Kartomi, "Concepts of Space," 1-2.

<sup>55</sup> Margaret Kartomi, "The Art of Body Percussion and Movement in Aceh and its Links in Countries around the Northern Rim of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean" (paper presented at the Conference on Music in the World of Islam, Asilah, Morocco, August 8-13, 2007), 2.

combinations, expressions of which are apparent to this day.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, instruments that are considered “pre-Islamic” may become “acceptable” in the eyes of Aceh’s *ulama* if they are accompanied by the singing of religious verses or the playing of the *rapa’i* (frame drum), which is understood to be a highly spiritual instrument.<sup>57</sup>

Aceh’s “pre-Islamic” instruments include the *geundrang* (the main drum of Aceh Besar, Pidie, and Aceh Utara), the *canang ceureukeh/seureukeh* (xylophones played by Acehnese women in rice-field after work or at home), the *moh-moh/shawm* (a small clarinet-like instrument), the *alèe tunjang* (rice-stamping pole), several wind instruments, such as the *bangsi*, *suleng*, or the *buloh*, and bowed or plucked instruments. As Islam spread throughout Aceh, leading *ulama* developed the idea that some instruments, such as the *rapa’i* drum, were more appropriate for religious worship than others. The distinctions between “pre-Islamic” and “Islamic” instruments were further emphasized during the colonial period, which saw an intense rivalry between Aceh’s *ulama* and *uleebalang*. According to Kartomi, “The *uleebalang* (and Dutch colonial administrators) continued to promote the non-Islamic arts, such as female welcome dances accompanied by the clarinet and drum ensemble, partly as a means of asserting their power against the rival *ulama*, who promoted genres in which Islamic texts were sung accompanied by or in alteration with frame drum ensemble or body percussion. Rivalry between the two groups of leaders emphasized the distinctions between the pre-Islamic and Islamic strata.”<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Kartomi, “On Metaphor and Analogy in the Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments in Aceh,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 37 (2005): 31.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.



Like Acehese dance, some Acehese musical practices are also gender segregated. For example, women tend to play flutes in rice fields and “less portable instruments” (such as xylophones) at home, while men play clarinets and large frame drums in public.<sup>59</sup> These distinctions have been muddled by the influence of Western instruments and musical styles. In recent years, Acehese men and women alike have used electric guitars, keyboards, bongos, and other instruments in their *kreasi baru* (“new creations”), which may or may not incorporate Acehese song, texts, or melodies.

Finally, Acehese theater differs considerably from the *wayang* shadow puppet genres of Bali and Java. Acehese theater is more accurately described as an oral storytelling genre, which combines singing, dancing, and the reciting of poetry or prose. Siapno observes, “The idea of *reading* in traditional storytelling is a performative act, quite different from our modern idea of *reading*, which is more or less a passive and solitary act. In traditional storytelling, the consumption of *hikayat* is primarily oral and aural, not visual, as it is in the consumption of modern print literature.”<sup>60</sup> In *hikayat*, a single performer, called a *yeh*, uses various techniques, including character impersonation, spontaneous singing, and the use of props, to relate well-known tales or stories. According to Amir, *hikayat* performers of the past were essentially wandering minstrels accompanied by small orchestras. Amir explains, “In the *hareubab* orchestra, for example, there is a musician, a male dancer, and another male dancer playing a female role. Each member of the group plays different roles that require different skills. Their abilities are measured not by how much they match one another but rather by how

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>60</sup> Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State*, 73.

they complement one another.”<sup>61</sup> The Gayo people of Aceh have a similar genre called *didong*, in which a *ceh* (leader) creates performances that blend Gayo or Acehnese history with current events. Because *hikayat* and *didong* performances rely heavily upon the use of local languages, they are difficult to transport to other regions of Indonesia, even though, in recent years, some oral story-telling performances have been recorded on electronic media and sold in cities such as Medan and Jakarta.

### **Reinforcing Assumptions**

As my brief introduction to Acehnese performance has attempted to show, Acehnese performance has emerged from a variety of influences and has been shaped by changes in power dynamics, religious values, and available forms of media. However, in acting as a reflection of a static Acehnese identity, Aceh’s performance traditions have been invoked to confirm the dominant narrative that depicts Acehnese as heroic fighters and devout Muslims. Some performance traditions have also been viewed as a reflection of Acehnese women’s agency and gender equality in Aceh.

### ***Political Identity***

In the same way that Acehnese histories may be skewed such that militancy and rebelliousness are accentuated within descriptions of Acehnese identity, Acehnese performance practices can also emphasize these particular traits. According to Margaret Kartomi, a renowned scholar of Indonesian—particularly Sumatran—performing arts, Acehnese performance is typically animated and “fiery,” with precise movements executed in simultaneity by multiple performers. For example, the practice of body percussion has been described by Kartomi as “a quintessential part of the people’s

---

<sup>61</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 33.

construct of their artistic identity, which is Muslim, based on gender segregation, and with many performances that possess a military-like quality of precision and virtuosity, ranging from the fiery, fast and brilliant to the tragic or calm.”<sup>62</sup> UNESCO has also reported that the Acehese performing arts are characterized by “a marching spirit that symbolizes the heroism they possess.”<sup>63</sup>

The themes of war and heroism have been traced to specific dance and musical practices. In the *Perang Sabil* (“Holy War”) dance, for example, Acehese dancers reenact the movements of soldiers during historical battles, particularly the Dutch-Aceh War. The performers carry *rencong* (Acehese swords) and demonstrate how these weapons are to be used in actual battles.<sup>64</sup> The *Daboih* dance<sup>65</sup> also highlights Acehese fighting spirit by showcasing the performers’ ability to withstand pain. *Daboih* performers begin rather slowly and mysteriously, then, in rhythm with the sound of the *rapai’i* drum, they repeatedly stab themselves with swords and other sharp objects. As I watched a *daboih* performance during the PKA-V, Aceh’s 5<sup>th</sup> Cultural Festival, my friend turned to me and joked, “You see? *Orang Aceh suka kekerasan* (Acehese people like violence).” These examples suggest that key aspects of Acehese identity, including the idea that they are a militant and war-loving people, can be found within Acehese performance.

### ***Religious Identity***

---

<sup>62</sup> Kartomi, “The Art of Body Percussion,” 1.

<sup>63</sup> Sangeeta Isvaran, “Art and Healing: Post-earthquake Relief Work Using the Performing Arts in Nias, Indonesia” (June 4, 2006), [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=30667&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=30667&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (accessed March 25, 2011).

<sup>64</sup> Holly Smith, *Aceh: Art and Culture*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57.

<sup>65</sup> Also known as *daboh* or *dabus*.

Acehnese performance can also be seen to reinforce the notion that Acehnese are exceptionally devout or that Acehnese Islam is more conservative, or more violent, than other Islamic practices within Indonesia. For example, many of Aceh's performing arts practices have Islamic origins, as they were brought to Aceh from Muslim traders who used performance to spread religious messages.<sup>66</sup> Margaret Kartomi explains, "The broad similarity of some of [Aceh's] movements and genres to those in some other Muslim areas, and the fact that the accompanying song texts often comprise or refer to Muslim themes, suggest to others that aspects of body percussion were originally introduced centuries ago from other parts of the Muslim world, after which a number of unique genres and styles developed in Aceh and Gayo on the basis of indigenous forms."<sup>67</sup> In addition to the body percussion movement, many Acehnese dances involve kneeling and bowing, a movement that is sometimes accompanied by the recitation of prayer. Acehnese performance can also offer a place to meditate and commune with God, particularly within the sitting genres. In performing sitting dances, performers may enter "a state of trance-like religious concentration, [which can] induce a joyous feeling of unity with the divine, and seem to bring the world into a state of harmony."<sup>68</sup> These performance styles reflect the notion that Acehnese are always in spiritual connection with God, or that they are more devout than other ethnic groups within Indonesia.

Other dances accentuate the perceived connection between Acehnese Islamic identity and violence. For example, within the *daboih* dance, in which performers stab themselves with swords or other objects, the performers also assumed to be operating

---

<sup>66</sup> Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere," 23-24.

<sup>67</sup> Kartomi, "The Art of Body Percussion," 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

under spiritual guidance or protection, which enables them to achieve invulnerability and commit violence acts.<sup>69</sup> The use of Acehnese *hikayat* and other performance genres to inspire violence during the Dutch-Aceh War, the Darul Islam rebellion, and the GAM conflict also suggests that Acehnese Islamic identity is strongly linked to violence. The *Hikayat Perang Sabil (HPS)*, for example, which tells of Acehnese holy wars, was recited during Aceh's early battles in order to intensify soldiers' fighting spirit. Alfian explains, "The *Hikayat* appears to have been effective in stimulating men, women and children to go to war, even against overwhelmingly superior weapons."<sup>70</sup> The *seudati* dance has also been identified as a tool that inspires Acehnese to fight, particularly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century against the Dutch.<sup>71</sup> Even in more recent rebellions, including the GAM conflict, Acehnese have turned to their performance practices to rally support.

Finally, the attitudes of Aceh's *ulama* towards Acehnese performance reflect the assumption that Acehnese Islam is especially conservative or strict. For example, many of Aceh's religious scholars are afraid that the performances could disrupt a devout lifestyle. Some *ulama*, including both Sunni and Syiah leaders, have prohibited the use of pre-Islamic instruments within Acehnese mosques, but are more tolerant towards performances that take place in other contexts.<sup>72</sup> Others, such as the more orthodox Wabbahi *ulama*, believe that the use of such instruments "can distract people from prayer and work and lead them into illicit activity, especially involving sex and alcohol."<sup>73</sup> In

---

<sup>69</sup> Kartomi, "Concepts of Space," 40.

<sup>70</sup> Teuku Ibrahim Alfian, "Aceh and the Holy War (*Prang Sabil*)," in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 111-113.

<sup>71</sup> Sal Murgiyanto, *Dance of Indonesia* (New York, NY: Festival of Indonesia Foundation, 1991), 23.

<sup>72</sup> Kartomi, "On Metaphor and Analogy," 35.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

this way, regulations of Acehese performance imposed by *ulama* can be seen as a reflection of Aceh's more conservative Islamic identity.

### ***Gender Relations***

The view that Acehese women are powerful leaders who have the same opportunities as men has also been linked to Acehese performing arts practices. The image of Aceh's "warrior women," for example, can be found within several dance and musical genres. According to Kartomi, the ideal sound and physical presentation for both male and female performers is "heroic, 'high-spirited and fiery, in accordance with the history and daily life of Acehese society.'"<sup>74</sup> The *Prang Sabillillah* dance, a female version of the *Perang Sabil* dance, also depicts women warriors whose movements recreate the defeat of Dutch colonists.<sup>75</sup> Further, the *buloh meurindu*, a pipe that is used to express longing, has been associated with female heroism, playing songs about "longing for love or freedom, heroism, war, religion, legends and so on," and for Kartomi, "the *buloh meurindu* is to the female voice as a heroine is to victory."<sup>76</sup>

Some scholars have also suggested that women can emerge as powerful figures within Acehese *hikayat* traditions. Examining the performances of Adnan PM Toh, for example, Ari Jauhari finds that women are able to dominate their husbands within domestic space. Because the female characters in Adnan's performance claim they will beat their husbands if they come home late or do not adequately contribute to the family, Jauhari writes, "All male characters were presented as the superior outside their

---

<sup>74</sup> Kartomi, "The Art of Body Percussion," 10.

<sup>75</sup> International Rescue Committee, "IRC Helps Aceh Dance Troupe Get Back on Its Feet," March 3, 2006.

<sup>76</sup> Kartomi, "On Metaphor and Analogy," 44.

home...[but] when it came to the house, women took over the power.”<sup>77</sup> This reading of *hikayat* reflects the view that Acehese women have control within the domestic realm.

Finally, my conversations with Acehese artists have suggested that men and women have equal opportunities within Acehese performing arts. For example, Acehese artists consistently claim that the practice of gender segregation within Acehese dance or the restrictions *ulama* have imposed upon performances can be seen as a reflection of Acehese tradition and/or Acehese Islamic identity, and do not discriminate against Acehese women in any way. Marzuki Hasan (“Pak Uki”), a well-known Acehese dance performer and instructor, offers a typical explanation of the relationship between gender, *adat*, and Islam within Aceh’s performing arts. When I asked Uki to discuss the bans *ulama* have placed on Acehese performance, he replied, “It’s been forbidden before by *ulama*, or by *teungku* or *ustad* in the past...but what was forbidden was not the arts, [it was] the ‘excess.’ For example, the competitions [would take place] from evening until sunrise...That you can’t do [because], as a Muslim, you won’t be able to perform the early morning prayers...Also, in the past, men and women have been separated within traditional Acehese dance and movement. But if a new dance is developed, we must create distance between them: the woman dances over there, and the male over here. But in traditional dance, men and women cannot mix.”<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Ari Palawi, “Aceh’s Indigenous Performance: A Case of Adnan’s Hikayat-Story Performance” (February 6, 2011), <http://www.globethics.net/web/guest/overall-search/title/Aceh%27s-Indigenous-Performance-4372118> (accessed March 25, 2011), 11.

<sup>78</sup> Marzuki Hasan, interview by author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 29, 2010. Indonesian: “*Pernah dilarang oleh ulama, atau oleh teungku atau ustad lama di sana, di Aceh. Sebenarnya...yang dilarang itu bukan keseniannya, sebenarnya. Excess. Excess jadi keseniannya, misalnya, pertandingan dari sore hari sampai terbit...Itu tidak boleh, kan? Sebagai seorang Muslim...salat subuh ngak ada. Juga, di tari adat laki-perempuan dulu ada pemisahannya, dalam tari, gerakan Aceh. Tapi kalau ada sebuah pemngembangan, kita harus bikin jarak—kalaupun dia menari, yang perempuan di sana, yang laki, sini...Tapi yang tradisinya tidak ada laki-laki perempuan campur menari, ngak.*”

According to Uki's explanation, *ulama* have placed bans on Acehese performance solely for the purpose of upholding the Muslim obligation to pray, while the practice of gender segregation is attributed to Acehese tradition. Barbara Metcalf's analysis of Javanese *wayang* also argues that the restrictions *ulama* have placed on performance function primarily to maintain Islamic values. In this view, *ulama* might object to performances because "it is against the *shari'ah* to waste money,' 'to go into debt unnecessarily,' 'to create a venue where men and women mix inappropriately,' 'to absorb people in activities that distract them from required worship,' and so forth."<sup>79</sup> Many Acehese artists and scholars also claim that the restrictions *ulama* place on performance affect men and women equally. In this way, the practice of gender segregation and the extent to which Acehese *ulama* have regulated Acehese performance practices are considered to reflect Acehese *adat* and Acehese Islam and are not seen to disadvantage or target women.

### **The Uses and Abuses of Tradition**

Although Acehese performance practices can be interpreted in ways that support dominant assumptions about Acehese political and religious identity as well as prevailing views of gender relations in Aceh, there are many other ways of understanding Acehese performance traditions. For example, despite the emphasis on war and military heroism within Acehese dance, music and *hikayat*, these are not the only themes that emerge; instead, many of the dances involve community ritual practices and aspects of everyday life. While the Tarek Pukat, or "pulling the net" dance incorporates the activities and methods of fishermen, performances of Alee Unjang recreate the practice

---

<sup>79</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, "Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia: History, Community, Morality," in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvath (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 316.



of pounding rice and incorporate a mortar and pestle within the dance.<sup>80</sup> The *seudati* dance has also been deemed “more naturalistic than religious” and has in previous years attempted to depict Acehese agricultural life.<sup>81</sup> Amir explains, “Before the post-colonial governments’ efforts to standardize and glamorize *seudati* performances, the dancers’ costumes simply consisted of a farmer’s shirt and a sarong. The dance movements and the accompanying songs...are also based on daily farm life experience.”<sup>82</sup> Sailing and the tradition of *merantau* has also been an important aspect of Acehese life. It is not surprising, then, that several Acehese sitting dances and their accompanying song lyrics express a longing for home and a desire to return to one’s village.<sup>83</sup>

The Islamic origins of many of Aceh’s performance genres, the use of prayer within dance movements and song lyrics, and the attitudes of Aceh’s religious authorities towards Aceh’s performing arts have served to reinforce the idea that Acehese are exceptionally devout or that Acehese Islam is especially conservative and violent. However, there are many different ways of characterizing the relationship between Aceh’s performing arts and Islam. First, although the singing of prayers or the playing of particular instruments is said to enable Acehese performers to commit acts of violence and withstand pain within military battles, these same performance activities can also result in the formation of communal bonds and religious “brotherhoods.” Kartomi explains:

In the latter half of the second millennium, strong Sufi influences among both Sunni and Syiah believers have resulted in the establishment of brotherhoods

---

<sup>80</sup> Smith, *Aceh: Art and Culture*, 58.

<sup>81</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 204.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

(*tarikat*, Ar. *tariqah*) throughout Aceh, formed from the sixteenth century or earlier and exemplified by the *rapa'i geurimpeng*, *rapai pulot* and *rapa'i daboh* frame drum genres mentioned below. The men of a village would join groups...[in which they] played their frame drums (*rapa'i*) and sang religious songs of praise in each other's homes on Thursday or Friday evenings, on holy days, and at weddings and other celebrations. The enthusiastic local acceptance of the brotherhoods and the exciting forms of religious exercises associated with them certainly promoted an emotional attachment to Islam in Acehese communities.<sup>84</sup>

In this sense, the influence of Islam upon Acehese performing arts can serve either to intensify military spirit or to strengthen peaceful bonds among village members; in both cases, Acehese are unified through their shared belief in and experience of their Muslim identity.

Second, although Acehese tend to emphasize their performance traditions' connection to Islam, Acehese performance, as I have shown, has been shaped by a range of influences, including Chinese, Hindu, and animist elements.<sup>85</sup> Kartomi explains, "Over the centuries, the Acehese tolerated and combined facets of all the relevant religions in various syncretic combinations, expressions of which are apparent to this day."<sup>86</sup> Further, the degree to which Aceh's performing arts signify Islamic affiliations is likely to shift as a result of political and societal forces. For example, it is only within the past one hundred years or so that having a reputation for Islamic devotion has brought

---

<sup>84</sup> Kartomi, "On Metaphor and Analogy," 34.

<sup>85</sup> Smith, *Aceh: Art and Culture*, 54.

<sup>86</sup> Kartomi, "On Metaphor and Analogy," 31.

Acehnese a sense of pride and distinction, which has led Aceh's religious authorities to emphasize the Islamic origins of Acehnese performance or to ignore signs of a pre-Islamic past.<sup>87</sup> Emphasizing Islamic elements within performance practices has also been a means to get past *ulama* censorship requirements, which have fluctuated over time. Amir explains, "Given that the writings of orthodox Islam generally disapprove of the performing arts, it is likely that Acehnese artists and art patrons adopted survival strategies for the arts to gain the stamp of approval from the religious authorities by claiming that they all either have an Islamic origin and derived from the Middle East, or were adapted to Islamic precepts by Muslim artists."<sup>88</sup> Thus, at the same time that Aceh's performing arts can be viewed as a reflection of Acehnese Islamic identity, they also permit the reconstruction of this identity to fit particular historical visions.

Finally, the extent to which Acehnese performance traditions signify the powerful status of Acehnese women or equal gender relations within Acehnese society deserves greater consideration. Although Acehnese women may emerge as strong and autonomous heroines within some performance practices, representations of femininity within other Acehnese arts forms have emphasized refinement and subservience. The *Pho* dance, which is a slow, sad dance originally intended to mourn the death of a leader, is performed exclusively by women. Today, the dance is performed at weddings to memorialize the life of the bride with her parents before she is passed on to her new family. This dance suggests that a warrior-like femininity in Aceh is not the only ideal, but that women should also express "refinement and softness."<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>88</sup> Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere," 204.

<sup>89</sup> Kartomi, "The Art of Body Percussion," 10.

Jacqueline Siapno's reading of Acehnese *hikayat* also suggests that women are not always presented in positions of power and agency within Aceh's performance traditions. Siapno explains, "In the conventions of the *hikayat* tradition, the queen is usually eliminated from the story after fulfilling her procreative function—giving birth to the heir to the throne. After she has delivered the babies, she usually disappears from the text."<sup>90</sup> As queens and mothers—that is, as "real" people—Acehnese women have little presence within *hikayat* tales; however, Siapno finds that women are afforded greater respect and power when represented as mythical figures or when their characters are associated with the "supernatural" realm. For example, in examining the *Hikayat Aceh*, which describes the early life of Sultan Iskandar Muda, Siapno argues, "This narrative hagiography of extraordinarily brilliant boys does not seem to exist for girls;" however, "The representation of female supernaturalness embodies a different form of Power—that of maternal ancestor or mother-goddesses... While political power is predominantly (but not exclusively) the domain of men... supernatural ancestors are the domain of the female."<sup>91</sup> This analysis of female characters within Acehnese *hikayat* resonates with my discussion of Aceh's four queens, Cut Nyack Dhien, and other "warrior women" in Chapter 1. Though these women have been praised for their strength, bravery, and leadership capabilities, Clavé-Çelik correctly observes that these women are reduced to archetypes while "real" women are not similarly lauded for occupying positions of power and are often excluded from Acehnese history. In this way, Acehnese *hikayat* tales suggest that powerful Acehnese women are acceptable only as characters, archetypes, or mythical figures.

---

<sup>90</sup> Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State*, 77.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

The view that Acehese women are in no way targeted or disadvantaged by the Acehese “tradition” of gender segregation or the restrictions *ulama* have placed upon Acehese performance must also be reexamined. For example, performances of *seudati*, a dance that has been particularly controversial for Islamic leaders, have been banned at different moments in Acehese history due to “their often brazen improvised texts, their audiences allegedly breaking the rule of strict gender segregation, and their rivalry with the chieftains (*uleebalang*), who promoted *seudati*, as a power group.”<sup>92</sup> In the early 1950s, *ulama* banned *seudati*, believing that performances of the dance were ‘immoral.’”<sup>93</sup> Though scholars have suggested that male and female performers were equally affected by these bans, it is only female performances of *seudati* that have been considered “immoral” and subject to revisions. Kartomi explains, “The *ulama* discouraged female performances and practices for ostensibly moral reasons. Banned in the rebellious Darul Islam insurgency during the early days of the Indonesian Republic...performances were allowed again [in 1972] after *seudati inong* had been given the more pious name of *laweuet*...Many *ulama* were still teaching that it is immodest and irreligious for females to appear on stage for mixed audiences.”<sup>94</sup> Iwan Amir also notes, “The female *seudati* dance is performed in Jakarta and taught at IKJ, but it is still banned in Aceh, or performed under a different guise (e.g. deliberately misnamed as *pho*, which is a different dance altogether), while in the diaspora it is combined with or treated as a prelude to the female sitting dance.”<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>93</sup> Kartomi, “On Metaphor and Analogy,” 34.

<sup>94</sup> Kartomi, “The Art of Body Percussion,” 5.

<sup>95</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 238.

In addition to the unequal degree of scrutiny to which female performers have been subjected, my research also suggests that Acehese women do not enjoy the same access to performance opportunities as men. Though most of the Acehese artists I spoke with felt that Acehese performance welcomes boys, girls, men and women, Yusrizal Ibrahim argues that social attitudes in Aceh can restrict women's performance opportunities, particularly at the professional level. Ibrahim explains, "In Aceh, being a professional female artist is very unconventional. If there are one or two women who choose that profession, society's view of them is very negative. They are often referred to as *inong biduen* [female entertainers], which means they are 'comfort women.' And, there is not a single family in Aceh who is ready to accept such *inong biduen* as their daughter-in-law."<sup>96</sup> As a result of these societal attitudes, Ibrahim concludes, "In Aceh...women do art only as a hobby, to fill free time during their school years. When they finish school and have a household, all arts activities are quickly abandoned. Only one or two people persist in these activities, training in *sanggar* and in schools."<sup>97</sup> Although there may not be explicit rules that forbid women from performing, social attitudes send the message that women's performance activities can only be "for fun," and that Acehese women are unwelcome as professionals within the field of the arts.

Agus Nur Amal, a well-known Acehese *hikayat* performer, has made a similar observation regarding women's involvement in the *hikayat* performance. When I asked

---

<sup>96</sup> Yusrizal Ibrahim, "Elly Zuarni: Meniti Seni di Tengah Badai Aceh," *Journal of Indonesian Performing Arts* 12(2003-2004): 161-62. Indonesian: "Di [Provinsi Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam] profesi seniwati sangat tidak lazim. Kalau pun ada satu dua orang wanita yang memilih profesi itu, pandangan masyarakat terhadap mereka sangatlah negatif. Mereka itu kerap disebut sebagai *inong biduen* (wanita *biduan*) yang artinya adalah wanita penghibur. Dan, tidak ada satu keluarga pun di Aceh yang bersedia menerima *inong biduen* tersebut sebagai menantu."

<sup>97</sup> Ibrahim, "Elly Zuarni," 162. Indonesian: "Di Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam...para wanita berkesenian hanya sebagai hobi pengisi waktu luang pada usia masih sekolah. Ketika mereka selesai sekolah dan berumah tangga, semua aktivitas kesenian segera ditinggalkan. Hanya satu dua orang saja yang menekuni kegiatan ini sebagai pelatih di *sanggar-sanggar* dan *sekolah-sekolah*."

Agus if there were any female *hikayat* performers I could visit in Aceh, he replied that he knew of only three women, all of whom live in Meulaboh. According to Agus, these women's careers as successful performers have caused conflict within their romantic relationships. Agus explains:

Ceh Pho, a woman about 50 years old, has, as far as I know, been divorced three times. Maybe because of poor economic [circumstances/standing]. Her previous husband was a *becak* driver...But now she had married again. Ceh Pho has a very nice voice. When improvising a story, Ceh Pho discuss the problems of living in Meulaboh, family problems, etc. This is presented through dancing. Ceh Pho can make audience cry when she talks about the history of a person who has died. Why did she divorce a couple of times? I think it was because her husband was jealous of her expertise...Ceh Nu is 45 years old, a pretty woman. She has her own *sanggar* [workshop] in Meulaboh. She is very well known as a *ceh*, a lead dancer or singer who accompanies the shaman dancing...I have seen her performance a couple of times in Meulaboh. Her voice is very nice. Then, because of her activity in public, her husband got envious. Her husband is a *becak* driver and they would always quarrel about their relationship. On many occasions, Ceh Nu wanted to separate. But it will not happen. Ceh Nu sometimes phones me about this problem."<sup>98</sup>

Agus' account of Ceh Pho and Ceh Nu suggests that Acehnese women are not only limited as professional dancers; they are also unwelcome within the realm of *hikayat* theatrical performance. Whether eliciting envy from their husbands or condemnation

---

<sup>98</sup> Agus Nur Amal, email message to author, November 26, 2010.

from community members for their status as disreputable “comfort women,” female performers in Aceh clearly face more obstacles than men. This analysis, however, rarely emerges within discussions of gender and Acehnese performing arts. Instead, scholars and Acehnese artists alike perpetuate the belief that regulations imposed upon Acehnese performers and performances result from Acehnese *adat* and Islamic values, and that these regulations have equal implications for men and women.

### **PERFORMING A DIFFERENT STORY**

My analysis of Acehnese traditions, including *merantau*, matrifocality, and Acehnese dance, music, and theater practices, has suggested that tradition can be a site in which dominant understandings of Acehnese identity are reinforced and reinvigorated. Though these narratives of Acehnese identity can bring cultural pride to Acehnese, such as the view that Acehnese are particularly heroic or devout, these narratives can also serve to obscure the complexity of Acehnese identity, to emphasize women’s connection to the domestic sphere, and point to a “tradition” of gender equality that does not exist in contemporary Aceh. As I will discuss throughout this dissertation, however, Acehnese traditions—specifically, the performing arts—have many different functions and hold significance for Acehnese for a variety of reasons. At the same time that Aceh’s performance practices may communicate particular assumptions about Acehnese identity and Acehnese society, the arts also provide a space in which to challenge dominant narratives, critique political and religious policies, and reconstruct Acehnese identity.

Much like Javanese *wayang* shows, Sumatran *randai* theater, and other Indonesian performance practices, Acehnese performing arts have offered a space for expressing social and political criticism. Within *saman* dance performances, for



example, Acehnese saw an opportunity to voice their concerns about the Dutch government, and as a result, the dance was banned during the colonial period. According to Sal Murgiyanto, however, the ban “did not stop the Acehnese from either continued creative activity or political resistance.”<sup>99</sup> More recently, Acehnese performing artists have addressed issues relating to the New Order government, the GAM conflict, and the tsunami within their crafts. The Aceh Student Solidarity group, in collaboration with several other arts groups from across the archipelago, performed in Jakarta in April and May of 1999 to call attention to the government’s human rights abuses towards particular ethnic groups, including Chinese-Indonesians, East Timorese, Papuans and Acehnese. Some of the dances performed had been banned under the New Order. Reviving these dances thus enabled the performers to directly confront political policies that marginalize these populations, and many performances were accompanied by discussions about East Timorese and West Papuan independence.<sup>100</sup>

Similarly, the Acehnese story-telling genre, *hikayat*, is an effective medium for expressing social criticism and establishing a forum for debate about typically taboo or sensitive topics. Agus Nur Amal, also known as PM Toh, is an Acehnese performer who addresses such topics as the GAM conflict, the tsunami, and Acehnese elections within his solo performances. Amal claims, “*Hikayat* is a reflection of Acehnese social life because it is constantly adapting to the current era.”<sup>101</sup> Though Amal claims that many of his stories are “innocent” kids’ tales, they often reference political and military events,

---

<sup>99</sup> Murgiyanto, *Dance of Indonesia*, 22.

<sup>100</sup> Sumit Mandal, “Creativity in Protest: Arts Workers and the Recasting of Politics and Society in Indonesia and Malaysia,” in *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia*, eds., Ariel Heryanto and Sumit Mandal (New York and London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 187.

<sup>101</sup> *Aktor Teatre PM Toh*, <http://www.tamanismailmarzuki.com/tokoh/toh.html> (accessed March 25, 2011). Indonesian: “*Hikayat adalah cermin hidup masyarakat Aceh karenanya selalu berubah sesuai kondisi zaman.*”

and it was after creating the *Hikayat Tsunami* (“Tale of the Tsunami”) that Amal’s popularity grew.<sup>102</sup> Bringing his traveling theater shows to street children, villages, and laborers, Agus Nur Amal’s performances open the door to conversations about difficult topics, defying the kinds of repressive military tactics that Acehese faced during the GAM conflict.<sup>103</sup> He also challenges the idea that serious political discussion is reserved for “serious” settings (i.e., government offices or news channels), inviting audiences to reflect on their daily experiences through metaphor and humor.

Another popular performance practice that may encourage communal dialogue and provide a space in which to re-imagine Acehese identity is the *tunang*, in which dance teams perform various *saman* dances in competition with each other. Each dance group is led by a *syeh*, who directs the rhythm and is responsible for keeping the group together. In some cases, the *tunang* performances have strict rules. For example, some *tunang* specify that no *saman* dance can be performed twice. In this case, one dance troupe might try to perform a *saman* that is perceived to be the other troupe’s strength so that they will not have a chance to perform it. The *tunang* performances also include improvisatory sections in which the *syeh* sings made-up lyrics in order to show off his sense of humor or vocal skill. As one *syeh* explained, “When it comes to songs, at least in the villages, you can sing practically anything, even rude words and expletives.”<sup>104</sup>

The extent to which this is true can be found in the documentary *Seudati: Percakapan Dengan Seniman* (Seudati: Conversations with Artists), which highlights a *tunang* performed during the fourth Acehese Cultural Festival (*Pekan Kebudayaan*

---

<sup>102</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 235.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>104</sup> *Seudati: Percakapan Dengan Seniman*. DVD, dir. Iwan Amir (Monash University, 2005).

*Aceh*, or PKA) in 2004. As the male dancers circle around the stage, their *syeh* launches into a story about “getting laid” and going to “Dorce’s home” (Dorce is a famous transvestite). The *syeh* adds other lewd lyrics, which produce loud laughter and clapping from the audience, including: “Tempted by a fucking summer bird...we go to the field, look around for some tits to liven things up. We have sex with women...plow the field...I’m going to play the garden until I’m satisfied...I’m going to grope every fruit too...A loud scream at the end of the night screaming loudly at night...oh, which girl was it?”<sup>105</sup> The audience—which is mixed—is largely entertained by these lyrics, cheering on the *syeh* and applauding his rhymes. The dancers continue monotonously, letting the *syeh*’s lyrics take center stage. According to Amir, “The most popular artists, those whose reputations are widely known by the public and whose performances are always in high demand, play a cat-and-mouse game by inserting provocative, subversive, and even lewd messages into their lyrics when the [religious] authorities are not looking. This is the main attraction for an audience, as it waits to anticipate each new surprise.”<sup>106</sup>

When part of the PKA festivals, *tunang* are government-supported and do not follow strict rules about gender segregation. In this regard, they may be important sites in which to explore alternative constructions of gender, sexual, religious, or ethnic identity. However, the *tunang* described above—in which a group of male performers makes jokes about the promiscuity or expendability of women for a predominantly male audience—does not offer a significant challenge to existing patriarchal ideologies.

## CONCLUSION

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 34.

This chapter has explored the ways in which Acehese traditions, including dance, music, and theater practices, can reinforce and reinvigorate dominant assumptions about Acehese identity. In supporting the idea that Acehese are heroic and independent fighters or exceptionally devout and even violent Muslims, for example, Acehese traditions obscure other ways of understanding Acehese identity. Moreover, in giving greater momentum to the notion that Acehese women are agents and decision-makers, or that gender equality is present within Acehese performance practices, traditions can mask the extent to which Acehese women are excluded from positions of power and from performance opportunities within their daily lives.

Despite these pernicious functions of tradition, I have also argued that Acehese traditions—particularly performance—can offer opportunities to challenge prevailing assumptions about Acehese identity, to critique repressive military policies and political ideologies, and to undermine patriarchal attitudes towards gender roles. In this way, Acehese performance may offer a powerful tool for resistance. The following chapter investigates these and other functions of Aceh's performing arts within a context of trauma and healing.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Aktor Teatre PM Toh*. <http://www.tamanismailmarzuki.com/tokoh/toh.html> (accessed March 25, 2011).
- Alfian, Teuku Ibrahim. "Aceh and the Holy War (*Prang Sabil*)." In *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, edited by Anthony Reid, 109-120. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006.
- Amir, Iwan. "Sing, Adapt, Persevere: Dynamics of the Traditional Vocal Performers in the Islamic Region of Aceh from the Late 19<sup>th</sup> to the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century." PhD diss., Monash University School of Music, Melbourne, 2006.
- Avonius, Leena. "Reconciliation and Human Rights in Post-Conflict Aceh." In *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*, edited by Birgit Bräuchler, 121-137. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Azriana, "Kepemimpinan Perempuan Aceh: Di Antara Peluang dan Tantangan Lokal." Paper presented at the Aceh Women's Leadership Conference, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. November 25, 2010.
- Bowen, John. "Modern Intentions: Reshaping Subjectivities in an Indonesian Muslim Society." In *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, edited by Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatich, 157-181. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.
- Echols, John M. and Hassan Shadily. *Kamus Indonesia-Inggris: An Indonesian-English Dictionary*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1989.
- Foulcher, Keith. "The Construction of an Indonesian National Culture: Patterns of Hegemony and Resistance." In *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*, edited by Arief Budiman, 301-320. Monash University: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990.
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Hughes-Freeland, Felicia. "Constructing a Classical Tradition: Javanese Court Dance in Indonesia." In *Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities*, edited by Theresa Buckland, 52-74. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.
- Hurgronje, C. Snouck. *The Achehnese*. Vol. 1. Translated by A.W.S. O'Sullivan. Leyden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill Publishers, 1906.
- Ibrahim, Yusrizal. "Elly Zuarni: Meniti Seni di Tengah Badai Aceh." *Journal of Indonesian Performing Arts* 12(2003-2004): 161-70.

- Immajati, Yulia. "Not Just an Inong: Acehese Women in the Midst of Conflict and Household Livelihood." PhD diss., Australian National University, Canberra, 2008. Quoted in Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Istiadah. "Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Investigating Paths to Resist the Patriarchal System." Centre of Southeast Asia Studies, Monash University. Monash, Australia, 1995.
- Isvaran, Sangeeta. "Art and Healing: Post-earthquake Relief Work Using the Performing Arts in Nias, Indonesia." June 4, 2006. [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=30667&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=30667&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (accessed March 25, 2011).
- Jauhari, Ari. "The Acehese Marriage." August 28, 2008. <http://ariaceh.wordpress.com/category/ethnomusicology/> (accessed January 24, 2011).
- Jayawardena, Chandra. "Women and Kinship in Aceh Besar, Northern Sumatra." *Ethnology* 16 (1977): 26. Quoted in Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Kartomi, Margaret. "Some Implications of Local Concepts of Space in the Dance, Music and Visual Arts of Aceh." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 36 (2004): 1–42.
- . "On Metaphor and Analogy in the Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments in Aceh," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 37 (2005): 25–57.
- . "The Art of Body Percussion and Movement in Aceh and its Links in Countries around the Northern Rim of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean." Paper presented at the Conference on Music in the World of Islam. Asilah, Morocco. August 8-13, 2007.
- Lawson, Stephanie. "The Tyranny of Tradition: Critical Reflections on Nationalist Narratives in the South Pacific." In *Narratives of Nation*, edited by Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas, 15-31. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.
- Mahmood, C. K. and S. L. Armstrong. "Do Ethnic Groups Exist? A Cognitive Perspective on the Concept of Cultures." *Ethnology* 31 (1992): 8. Quoted in *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*, edited by Birgit Bräuchler. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Mandal, Sumit. "Creativity in Protest: Arts Workers and the Recasting of Politics and Society in Indonesia and Malaysia." In *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Ariel Heryanto and Sumit Mandal, 178-210. New York and London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

- Menggalang Perubahan: Perlunya Perspektif Gender dalam Otonomi Daerah*. Jakarta, Indonesia: Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, 2004.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. "Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia: History, Community, Morality." In *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, edited by Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvath, 309-322. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.
- Missbach, Antje. "Long-distance Politics in Transition: Aceh's Diaspora During and After the Homeland Conflict (1976-2009)." PhD diss., The Australian National University, Canberra, 2009.
- Murgiyanto, Sal. *Dance of Indonesia*. New York, NY: Festival of Indonesia Foundation, 1991.
- Palawi, Ari. "Aceh's Indigenous Performance: A Case of Adnan's Hikayat-Story Performance." February 6, 2011. <http://www.globethics.net/web/guest/overall-search/title/Aceh%27s-Indigenous-Performance-4372118> (accessed March 25, 2011).
- Robinson, Kathryn. *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Sears, Laurie, ed. *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Seudati: Percakapan Dengan Seniman*. DVD. Dir. Iwan Amir. Monash University, 2005.
- Siapno, Jacqueline. *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State in Aceh: The Paradox of Power, Co-optation and Resistance*. London: Routledge-Curzon, 2002.
- Siegel, James T. *The Rope of God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Smith, Holly. *Aceh: Art and Culture*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Srimulyani, Eka. "Inspired by History." *Inside Indonesia* 103. Jan-March 2011. <http://www.insideindonesia.org/feature/inspired-by-history-13011399> (accessed March 25, 2011).
- Suryakusuma, Julia I. *Sex, Power and Nation: An Anthology of Writings, 1979-2003*. Jakarta, Indonesia: Metafor Publishing, 2004.
- Turino, Thomas and James Lea, eds. *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities*. Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2004.