SUMMARY BECOMING BETTER MUSLIMS: RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND ETHICAL IMPROVEMENT IN ACEH, INDONESIA

The Indonesian province of Aceh is known as rebellious. The most recent eruption was the civil war between the Indonesian army and the ethno-nationalist separatist movement GAM, which started in 1976 and could only be ended after the destructive Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. Aceh is also known as strictly Islamic. When Aceh is featured in the media, the focus is often on the implementation, since 2003, of a local formulation of Shari’a law. Is this a sign that Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, is gradually becoming an ‘Islamic state’? Or is Aceh an exception, which tells us little about the rest of the country and the region?

Public and scholarly debates often pay little attention to the impact of these developments on Acehnese society. At the same time, little is known about the ways in which these developments are shaped and influenced by the practices and experiences of ordinary Muslims, by which I mean those people who do not have much power, influence or special forms of knowledge. As a result, ordinary Acehnese often seem like passive players in the making of their future. In this dissertation I ask how individual Acehnese Muslims practice and experience their religion, and how they deal with, or try to influence the process through which ‘official’ norms are established. Put briefly, I argue that people in Aceh rely on their own personal space for action as they negotiate the norms stated ‘for them’ by state institutions and religious functionaries.

This dissertation is based on a combination of archival research and anthropological fieldwork. Between 2008 and 2010 I conducted research about the everyday religious practices and experiences of ordinary Acehnese. Most of the people I came to know in this period were not particularly fanatical, rebellious, or dogmatic. They did, however, take their faith seriously and generally wished or hoped for others to do the same. I was surprised, moreover, by the confidence, patience and eloquence with which many of my interlocutors explained to me that faith (iman) and religious practice (ibadah) should be understood not so much as a given, but rather as a personal, lifelong, ‘process’, part of a broader, but equally personal, ethical ‘project. What I was observing, then, was a particular form of individuality, which revealed itself through the emotional importance attached to a process of continuous, critical reflection on morally defined choices, decisions, and dilemmas. In the study of Aceh, and Muslim Southeast Asia more generally, these expressions of ‘inner Islam’ have been largely neglected.

Two forces have been particularly important, historically, in claiming the right to define Islamic norms. These are, on the one hand, the state, and on the other hand the ulama (religious scholars), the main representatives of religious authority in Aceh. I argue that, in order to make statements about the relationship between individual Muslims, the state, and the ulama, we should take seriously personal styles of religiosity as a source of agency. I advance the concept of ‘religious agency’ to analyse how everyday moral stances, practices and strategies interact with the structural constraints based on the abstract, or ‘universal’ norms posed by the state and the ulama. The individual chapters each elaborate a particular historical or ethnographic dimension of this relationship between individual agency and normative Islam.

Chapter 1 serves both as a general introduction and as an elaboration of the conceptual and theoretical framework. One of the main reasons for my decision to focus on ‘religious agency’ is that, in the study of Islam in Southeast Asia, religious differences
are often ‘explained away’ to the non-religious categories, such as gender or class. In my view, this obscures how ordinary Muslims draw on personal processes of ethical improvement in order to claim space for individual action.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are historical in nature. Chapter 2 focuses on early modern epic poems (*hikayat*) as a source for social and intellectual history. I argue that the Acehnese literary tradition reflects the formation of an individualised religious consciousness. Structural changes in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, such as the fragmentation of the sultanate state, an increase in cash cropping, and the emergence of the *ulama* as a social force in rural areas, coincided with a shift in the literature from a moral paradigm centred on divine kingship and ritual hierarchies to a new model of ethical reflection and individual responsibility. This shift is particularly strong in the content of the nineteenth century war literature, which was a result of the Dutch colonial invasion of Aceh in 1873.

Chapter 3 focuses on the colonial period and the imagination of the Acehnese as a ‘pious’ people. Although I discuss different dimensions of the colonial encounter, this part of the dissertation ultimately works towards a reassessment of the social and political role of the Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh (All-Acehnese Association of Ulama, 1939). The PUSA was a religious social movement, led by reform-minded *ulama*, which coupled Islamic scripturalism to a new sense of regional identity. The PUSA is often regarded in the literature as an anti-colonial phenomenon, not in the least place because the organisation played an important part in the expulsion of the Dutch (by the Japanese) in 1942. However, this chapter shows that there were also remarkable analogies between the ideologies of Islamic reformers and the colonial administration, including a propensity to declare particular expressions of Islamic mysticism as ‘deviant’ and dangerous, and to place the idea of a true, orthodox Islam at the centre of Acehnese identity.

Chapter 4 moves on to investigate the impact of the PUSA, in the context of the relationship between Aceh and the Indonesian national state, on village society. It focuses on the sub-district of Indrapuri, which, in the 1950s and 1960s, became a hotspot of a religiously motivated rebellion, the Darul Islam. This chapter is based for an important part on the field notes of Chandra Jayawardena, an anthropologist who conducted extensive ethnographic research in Indrapuri in the early 1970s. The impact of normative Islam on Acehnese religious life was clearly noticeable, but also limited and uneven. From the 1960s onwards, the state was able to assert its influence more strongly at the local level. As a result, religious and political authority gradually converged. Local representatives of the state, such as district or sub-district heads, but also village heads and lower civil servants, sought to control local infrastructures of religious authority. Villagers responded to this process by using the state and religious authority to advance their own interests.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are based entirely on ethnographic data, collected in two locations: an urban, tsunami-affected neighbourhood in the provincial capital Aceh Besar, and a small rural village in the sub-district of Aceh Besar, pseudonymically referred to as Blang Daruet and Juroung. Chapter 5 deals with perceptions of moral leadership in Juroung. It focuses on a conflict between villagers and the leaders of a traditional religious boarding school (*dayah*) adjacent to the village, which was caused by the *dayah* leadership’s meddling in village affairs, close links between the *dayah* and the local government, and the shady processes of dividing government funds officially directed at village development. In my analysis of the moral dimensions of this conflict, I put the emphasis on a difference between generations. I noticed that young people were inclined, much more than their elders, to view ‘traditional’ institutions such as the village and the
*dayah*, as a part of the state. On basis of this observation, I argue that, over the past decades, ordinary villagers have become increasingly pragmatic consumers of religious authority, without considering irrelevant traditional elements in village organisation.

Chapter 6 connects the study of Aceh to the scholarly debate about the global religious resurgence. I focus on the relationship between Eri, a young Acehnese man in Blang Daruet, and his parents. Eri was 24 years old when I first met him. He had adopted a strongly outward pious life-style, inspired by the global forces of Islamic revivalism. I investigate the influence of Eri’s moralistic attitude on the lives of his parents. Eri’s ideas about the observance of scriptural norms was neither rejected nor fully accepted by his family. Rather, his parents’ thoughts and behaviour, as connected to the memory of the 2004 tsunami, and perceptions of community, money, status, class mobility and gender, offer a demonstration of the idea of religious agency which is central to the argument of this book.

Chapter 7 deals with the problem of sinning, as approached by my interlocutors in the context of the current implementation of Shari’a law. It revolves around the lives of four individuals: an older man in Juroung, preparing, practically and emotionally, for the final stage of his life; a young, unmarried women in Blang Daruet trying to cope with the losses and changes resulting from the tsunami; and finally two young men from another Banda Aceh neighbourhood (one of them a recidivistic sinner, who regarded with a combination of respect and suspicion the ‘pious turn’ of the other, who was his best friend). I argue in this chapter that even the basic concern of dealing with bad behaviour is, at the level of lived experiences, marked by considerable measures of ambiguity, flexibility and creativeness. Importantly, these sensibilities influence the ways in which my interlocutors approached the legalistic moral frameworks formulated by the state. Rather than rejecting or adopting the claims vested in state Islam, I argue that these people actively selected and appropriated discourses of state Islam whenever they made decisions, approached dilemmas, or justified behaviour.

These conclusions resonate with a trend in the anthropology of Islam, which emphasises personal piety and religious experience. In contrast to some influential recent studies, however, I am not primarily concerned with the search for pious ‘perfection’ or the modes of self-discipline commonly associated with the revival of Islamic activism. I argue that more attention should be given to the workings of doubt, moral ambivalence, socially accepted modes of ‘indifference’, and imperfection and failure as a part of individual ethical improvement. Age, life phase, and the interaction between different generations are therefore a recurrent theme in this book. In the study of Islamic subjectivity this is still a highly underdeveloped terrain.

Acehnese Muslims, like most people, deal with countless setbacks, differences of opinion, and failures as they attempt to live a ‘good’ life. The particularities of a specific Acehnese religiosity should not be sought, therefore, in an essentialised imagination of Acehnese ‘piety’. Expressions of normative Islam, including the state implementation of Shari’a law, produce not just constraints but also space for individual interpretation and the possibilities to act on this. It is exactly because of the important role of political Islam in the history of Aceh that Acehnese Muslims have learned to navigate, and thereby also influence, official norms.