CHAPTER 1  INNER ISLAM AND THE PROBLEM OF ACEHNESExCEPTIONALISM

‘This is my fate, so I have to keep making an effort.’
– A woman (Banda Aceh, 2008).

My first visit to Aceh was in December 2006. Two years earlier, on 24 December 2004, a tsunami had annihilated large parts of the provincial capital Banda Aceh and most of the Acehnese West coast, claiming some 167,000 lives across the province.1 This was a short trip. At the time I lived in Penang, a small island state in Malaysia, where I conducted research for my Master’s thesis. I had not been to Indonesia before, and Aceh seemed like an interesting place. I was aware that the Acehnese, facing ‘Mecca to the west’ rather than ‘Jakarta to the east’, had a name for being pious and rebellious. Yet my decision was related to a more basic human interest. I was curious to see how people were recovering from the tsunami. At the same time, it was clear to me that interesting dynamics were taking place. In August 2005, after thirty years of civil war between the separatist movement Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Aceh Independence Movement, or GAM) and the Indonesian government, a peace treaty had been signed. In December 2006 the province was staging the election of a new governor, involving the participation of ex-leaders of the formally disbanded GAM. This was a significant political experiment, and the campaign was well under way.

On 30 November I boarded a plane to Medan. I changed to a minibus, which took me, along the North coast of Sumatra, to Banda Aceh in roughly 8 hours. There I met with two friends – fellow students in Penang –, and Nurdin, an Acehnese acquaintance and Banda Aceh resident. In the following days, Nurdin showed us around the city and its surroundings (over the years, he would become a personal friend). We visited the old Dutch cemetery, one of the most important physical reminders of the Dutch colonial invasion and Acehnese resistance, as well as a dusty ‘Aceh Museum’. Another interesting historical site was the Gunongan, a sculptured mountain situated in what used to be the gardens of the royal palace, revealing the blending of Muslim and Hindu-Buddhist symbols, a characteristic feature of many royal courts in early modern Southeast Asia. We visited the impressive Mesjid Raya (Grand Mosque) Baiturrahman, which was built by the Dutch colonial government to make up for the destruction of the original mosque, and expanded several times since. And, of course, we witnessed the effects of the tsunami. Two years after the disaster, the signs were still everywhere. A large part of the city, which lies stretched out on a lowland plain, was swept away. In some of these areas new neighbourhoods had emerged, consisting of houses built by foreign NGO’s. The landscape had changed. Large, formerly inhabited areas had been transformed into swampy terrain full of debris. Other parts of the city were badly damaged. We visited mass graves, in which only a fraction of the victims lay buried (most bodies were never found). We visited an enormous ship, a former floating electricity plant, which had been carried several kilometres inland, and now stood in the centre of a reconstructed neighbourhood as an intrusive memorial.

One day at noon, we stopped to eat lunch in a small eating stall (warung), built of some wooden planks and boards, close to the coast. We were served by a middle-aged

1 Estimates of the death toll vary between 130,000 and 200,000. 167,000 is the official number used in most government publications.
lady. She told us that most of her family, including her husband and children, had been swallowed by the waves. She was alone now, and had lived in emergency barracks for more than a year. She asked us to help her. Nurdin explained that, unfortunately, we were students and not 'NGO people' (bukan orang NGO). I asked: ‘Are you not afraid, living so close to the coast?’ She shrugged, and said: ‘This is my village.’ I asked about the warung. She said that family members had helped her build it. She was thankful, to her family and to God (bersyukur). Her children were in heaven now, but God had decided that it was her task to live. ‘This is my fate (takdir), so I have to keep making an effort (berusaha).’ The warung made it possible for her to do this, and to earn a living for herself. However brief, I felt confronted in this chance encounter with something I would recognise later in the literature as the resilience of the Acehnese people. Defiantly, this woman was speaking of God and faith, while taking, at the same time, her fate into her own hands. Her words made a big impression on me, and it was this moment when I decided that I would return to Aceh.

Stating norms, claiming space

The Acehnese are commonly regarded as a ‘pious’ people, who famously refer to their homeland as the ‘Veranda of Mecca’ (Serambi Mekkah), that is, as the first point of entry for people from across the archipelago to the Holy land of Islam. In the construction of Acehnese ethnic identity, Islam takes central stage. ‘Being Acehnese’, apart from speaking (any dialect of) the Acehnese language, following locally defined traditional customs (adat), and identifying with the Acehnese past, means to be Muslim. Firmly attached to the Serambi Mekkah discourse is the politically malleable claim that Acehnese Muslims, by simple virtue of being Acehnese Muslims, have a particular responsibility toward their community to ‘advance’ their religion and to engage in ‘proper’ Muslim conduct.

A lot has been written in recent decades about the techniques of formal disciplining in Aceh, from the development of a sophisticated system of Islamic courts by the seventeenth century sultanate state to the attempts to implement a local system of Shari’a law in the mid-twentieth century and again today.2 In contrast, very little is known about the question how ordinary Acehnese Muslims, without much power, influence, or special kinds of knowledge (Peletz 1997) shape, judge and adjust their own behaviour in relation to these developments. How do ordinary Acehnese Muslims experience their daily lives? What (old or newly formed) religious routines and practices do they engage in? How have they dealt with the increasing range and intensity of moral admonitions, purist pressures, and knowledge regimes designed by the state and other public actors? This dissertation is an attempt to answer these questions.

In this introductory chapter I will explain my central theoretical and historiographic concerns and research methods. First, however, I will briefly discuss the established historical narrative of political Islam, state interference, and armed rebellion from the early history of the Aceh Sultanate up until the present.

The idea that the Acehnese are an ‘exceptionally’ pious people has a long history. It is rooted, at least partly, in the contention that Pasai (near present day Lhokseumawe, on the Acehnese North coast) was the first kingdom in the archipelago to convert to Islam, after which it was incorporated by the Sultanate of Aceh in the early sixteenth century. In the course of that century, Aceh became the most powerful kingdom in the western part of the Malay-Indonesian world. The epitome of this power was the legendary Sultan Iskandar

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Muda (r. 1607-1637), a king remembered for respecting and strengthening Islamic law. During my fieldwork people often referred to the rule of Iskandar Muda as the ‘golden age’ (zaman emas) of Aceh, during which the law was still properly enforced. According to one popular story, the king had his own son executed for committing adultery. Thus, he demonstrated that he would not discriminate between his subjects before the eyes of God.\(^3\)

The image of a long-standing Acehnese piety is also fuelled by the protracted struggle against colonial domination (1873-1942), which was led by religious teachers (ulama), and perceived by many fighters as a ‘holy war’ (prang sabil). In the Hikayat Prang Kompeuni (‘Story of the War against the Dutch’), an Acehnese-language poem composed in the late nineteenth century, resistance against the Dutch ‘infidels’ (kafir) was explained as a pious act, and as a religious responsibility. The Dutch were able to control most parts of Aceh by the early 1920s, but the resistance never stopped completely. Up until their expulsion by the Japanese in 1942, Dutch soldiers actively searched the villages in the Acehnese interior for copies of the poem, which they regarded as a primary expression of Acehnese ‘fanaticism’, and a dangerous piece of propaganda.

Upon the declaration of Indonesian independence in 1945, Aceh became a province within the new nation state. Acehnese intelligentsia enthusiastically embraced the project Indonesia, and the promises of modernity it contained. At the same time, the first Governor of the independence period, a reform-minded ulama called Teungku Daud Beureueh, was straightforward about his aspiration to create a ‘truly Islamic’ polity in Aceh, including the systematic implementation of Shari’a law. His government made a serious attempt at creating a system of Islamic courts (Mahkamah Syariah), to be placed under the control of ulama and function autonomously from the central government. The rise to power of reformist ulama was a contested development, however, and ultimately the attempts to Islamize the political and juridical system failed, because it lacked the support of government leaders in Jakarta and local elites in Aceh.

Disappointment among reformist ulama, as well as a range of other social and economic factors, eventually culminated in the outbreak of an armed rebellion under the banner of ‘Darul Islam’ (‘Abode of Islam’, 1953-1962). Central to this revolt was the idea of the ‘broken promise’. According to Daud Beureueh, who led the rebellion, President Sukarno had promised him, in a personal conversation in 1947, that Aceh would be allowed to implement Shari’a law. When the government abolished Aceh province in 1951 (incorporating it into North Sumatra, with Medan as capital), nullifying most of its ‘Islamic’ regulations, this was regarded as treason. The revolt could only be ended when the central government reconfirmed Acehnese autonomy in matters of religion, education and customs (adat).

The promise of autonomy remained unfulfilled, however, as power was further concentrated in Jakarta by General Suharto’s New Order government (1965-1998). In the early 1970s, Mobil Oil Indonesia discovered enormous reserves of natural gas near the city of Lhokseumawe, in the district of North Aceh, and Jakarta’s policy of appropriating these resources sowed the seeds for a new conflict. In 1976, Hasan di Tiro – a former Darul Islam member and the grandson of a famous ulama fighting in the Aceh War – founded the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Aceh Independence Movement, or GAM). Although the GAM came forth, at least partly, from Darul Islam cadres, this was a different kind of revolt. The Darul Islam rebellion had never been designed to separate Aceh from Indonesia. Instead, it had aspired to make Indonesia as a whole into a more ‘Islamic’ state. The GAM, in contrast,

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\(^3\) A contemporary VOC report (Daghregister, 9 December 1637) confirms the execution, but says nothing about the reason (Djajadiningrat 1911).
developed a largely secular, ethno-nationalist discourse, directed at ‘restoring’ Aceh to its pre-colonial position as an independent state.

In 1999, one year after the Asian financial crisis heralded the fall of the New Order regime, Aceh was allowed by the government in Jakarta to implement a regional formulation of Shari’a law, as part of a new autonomy package, and amid hopes to end the ongoing conflict. The initiative was immediately rejected by the GAM, which considered Jakarta’s ‘turn to Islam’ as a move to deflect attention from the roots of the conflict, and delegitimize the separatists in the eyes of the Acehnese people. Regardless this stance, various Shari’a bylaws (qanun) were created, including regulations on dress (such as the obligation to wear a headscarf for women), the criminalisation of adultery (zina) and illicit proximity (khalwat), prohibitions of gambling (maysir), alcohol and other intoxicants (khamr), the establishment of Shari’a courts and a Shari’a police force, and corporal punishment.

The first public caning (of fifteen men found guilty of violating the law on gambling) took place in 2005, on the square in front of the Great Mosque in Banda Aceh. In the same year, a peace agreement was signed by the Indonesian government and the GAM. The rebel movement was disarmed, and turned into a political party, called Partai Aceh (PA), which is currently in power both at the provincial level and in most of the districts. The approach by PA leaders towards Shari’a law has been ambiguous. Although some administrators have enthusiastically assumed the role of pro-Shari’a advocates, most of Aceh’s new leaders have prioritized other issues.

From this discussion it becomes clear that, during the past century and a half, Islam has been a central factor in Acehnese self-consciousness, regime change, emerging nationalism, and post-conflict reconciliation. The dominant modern narrative of Acehnese history and society is framed in terms of a strong regional attachment, a fraught relationship with the political ‘centre’ in Batavia/Jakarta, and a focus on Islamic law and communal piety setting the Acehnese ‘apart’ from other peoples in Indonesia. Yet about the question what pervasiveness, and political effects, this discourse entails, vivid scholarly debate exists, for example about the question whether or not the recent implementation of Shari’a law is based on ‘local’ tradition.4

The major underlying problem, I believe, is that in most studies of Aceh Islam is presented as a kind of ‘self-explanatory’ category of analysis. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, although Islam features prominently in most studies about Acehnese history and politics, Acehnese religiosity remains to be heavily understudied. Up until now, James Siegel’s The Rope of God (1969) is the only comprehensive ethnographic account of a lowland Acehnese community since the work of Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1893-95). There is, in other words, a lack of empirical data to counter or complicate the ‘mythical’ status of Acehnese religiosity. The second reason is that, in much of the writing about Aceh, Islam is presented as a factor of social change only when it ‘reveals’ itself as a political force. In this framework, Islam is approached almost exclusively as a legitimising ‘ideology’ for political action. The result is that, instead of being questioned or explained, expressions of religious identity have been reified as a central factor of meaning and

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4 Edward Aspinall (2009), in his work on the conflict and the emergence in the twentieth century of Acehnese nationalism, emphasised the role of the central government in Jakarta, an aligned Acehnese technocratic elite, and their joint contention that Shari’a should be a part of the solution to the conflict. In contrast, Lindsey et al. (2007:216-22), while not denying that Shari’a was seen by Jakarta as a ‘political tool’, argued instead that the Shari’a revival must be seen explicitly in the context of a ‘return to [Aceh’s] past prosperity’, an ‘assertion of Acehnese identity’ and as a ‘means of re-emphasizing perceived traditional Acehnese values’.
priority in Acehnese ‘political’ life. The troubling outcome is a conflation of Islam and violence, based on a dubious causal connection between Aceh’s reputation as the place from which the Islamic faith spread into Southeast Asia and its name for being a ‘traditional’ site of political violence. At the same time, the ‘self-explanatory’ status of Acehnese piety seems to have rendered the study of the region almost immune to the analysis of ‘deep’ social and religious change, including, ironically, ‘Islamisation’, and its impact on the lives of ordinary people.

I came back to Aceh for longer visits between 2008 and 2010, to conduct research on the everyday religious practices of ‘ordinary Acehnese’. Most of the people I came to know in this period were not particularly fanatical, rebellious, inflexible 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 agency, 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 Southeast Asia more generally, these expressions of inner Islam have been largely neglected.

Taking this ‘religious agency’ seriously, as a researcher, entails a nuanced, historically informed ethnographic approach, in which Islam is placed, conceptually, in a dynamic context of multiple moral-intellectual frameworks, or, to borrow the terminology of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1988), multiple ‘traditions of moral inquiry’. It entails focusing less on the question what ‘shape’ (or shapes) Islam takes in any given place (fanatical, moderate, scripturalist, mystical, syncretistic), and more on the question how people of different backgrounds have tried to make the best of their lives, while simultaneously asking themselves the question: How can I be, or become, a good human being? (Schielke 2009). I will argue that, over a very long period, ordinary Muslims in Aceh have learnt, and become accustomed, to be conscious of, and articulate about, their existence as individual Muslims in a world of moral uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction, and doubt. This mentality is contingent on the contested meaning of ‘Aceh’ as a socio-geographic space, and the increasing intensity of instrumentalising Islam for contrasting political visions.

To support this argument, this dissertation focuses on the dynamic, tripartite relationship between normative Islam, the state, and individual religiosity. The concept of individual religious agency should not be regarded as isolated from, or a form of ‘resistance’ against, public or political Islam. In my understanding, it refers simultaneously to a process of stating and defining norms, and to a process of granting and claiming individual space. Two forces may be ascribed the capacity of ‘granting’ space for religious

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6 Besides prevalent in speech, these stereotypes are manifest in the ways in which ‘Aceh’, ‘the Acehnese’, or ‘Acehnese culture’ are represented in books, films, street names, or places such as the theme park of cultural diversity in Indonesia, Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (Beautiful Indonesia in Miniature). For a discussion, see Drexler 2008:49-67. During the more recent separatist conflict (1976-2005), the Indonesian government and military made explicit use of the stereotype of Acehnese fanaticism in order to frame the rebellion as being ‘Islamic’ in character, despite the fact that the GAM appealed to an ethno-nationalist rather than an Islamist ideology. However, even scholars have managed to present the GAM rebellion as ‘Islamic’, or even ‘Islamist’ in nature. See, e.g., Geertz 2004:579; Vickers 2005:179-80; Voll 1994:344.
agency to take place. The first is organized religion. The second is the state. These forces are comparable, in the sense that they constitute coherent (albeit changing) sets of norms and values, coherent sets of standardising institutions, and distinct hierarchies and networks of individuals. While state and religious institutions establish norms of religious practice and pious behaviour, individuals make use of their religious agency when they negotiate, redefine, or appropriate these norms, thus claiming the space desired by them at any given point. Their success in doing so depends on a variety of factors. Time frame is one of them, as are social, political and geographic context, individual or communal assertiveness, and personal character. To view state, religious authority and individual space in terms of a dynamic interaction involves an explicit acknowledgment of the fact that the boundaries between these concepts are relatively open, rather than fixed or clear-cut frontiers.

The dynamic of stating norms and claiming space is not a process specific to Aceh. Rather, it is a general process, taking place everywhere, at any time. The point I want to emphasize, then, is that previous studies of Aceh have been limited to an almost exclusive focus on the dialogue between (agents of) the state and religious authority, thus ignoring the agencies of ordinary Acehnese as Muslims. In the following chapters I will trace these interactions, as well as the shifting boundaries between them, through time and space, by focusing on their day to day encounters in Acehnese society. How does the complex of state, religion, and religious agency unfold, over time, and in different places? What happens when one of the variables changes, in terms of nature, scale, or intensity? Just like the religious practices and experiences of Muslims and other believers elsewhere, those of ordinary Acehnese are related in dynamic ways to state-centred and otherwise public or ‘officialised’ discourses and configurations. In this sense, this dissertation presents a clear case against Acehnese exceptionalism and the concomitant stereotypes of fanaticism and Islamic militancy referred to above. What makes the Acehnese case special is not the fact that ‘the Acehnese’ are particularly pious, but that the political importance of Islam has made ordinary people articulate, perhaps more than elsewhere in the archipelago, about their personal responsibilities as Muslims, and about their desires and strategies of claiming space for a personal interpretation of ‘correct’ behaviour.

This argument has implications, I think, for the broader debate about Islamisation, and its impact on the study of religious diversity and ‘difference’ more generally. In recent decades, the study of Islam has been dominated by a strong focus on politics, religious (or ‘pietistic’) social movements, civil society, and groups and networks engaging in religiously motivated violence or ‘terrorism’. In the wake of the global religious resurgence, and the acknowledgement that public religion is ‘here to stay’, this focus has created a tenacious, but also misleading conviction that ‘Islamisation’ is an all-powerful, pervasive and coherent ‘force’ engulfing Muslim societies and political systems around the world (Peletz 2011). Some historians and anthropologists have complicated this view by relating varieties in Islamic ‘currents’ or ‘orientations’ to other (non-Islamic) identifications, including class, gender, and local, place-specific traditions (in Indonesia commonly categorised as adat). Although I agree that it is crucial to take these different identities into account, I reject the implicit suggestion that the perseverance of religious

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7 This applies not just to Muslim majority societies, but also to the study of Muslim minorities, including those living in the West. As Thijl Sünier (2009) has forcefully argued, research agendas on Islam in Europe ‘tend to focus almost exclusively on the political priorities of integration and domestication. (…) Whereas Islam has become the common denominator for a wide range of phenomena, problems, attitudes and developments, as fields of research religious practices and the production of religious knowledge among Muslims have suffered from programmatic concealment and downright neglect.’
diversity within Muslim communities should be sought entirely (or even primarily) outside the realm of personal religious experience. In contrast, I propose to take seriously the ‘inner’ lives of ordinary Muslims, and to connect its expressions to a discussion about individual agency. Thus, next to the right claimed by state and religious institutions to define a particular kind of ‘truth’, I place the right claimed by ordinary Muslims to be a particular kind of person.

To demonstrate how this works, it is necessary to study religious practice less as a phenomenon, and more as a historically contingent process, in which religious authority, state sanctioned discourses, and individual consciousness interact. At the same time, these choices imply that we concentrate – much more than we are used to – on the way in which religious practices are framed by individual believers as a personal, lifelong process of ethical improvement. It is not my goal to design a theory of ‘ethics’, or to engage in a debate with a centuries long tradition of (western) philosophy that has taken ethics as its central concept. Rather, I am interested in what Michael Lambek has called ‘ordinary ethics’, or the ethical as a ‘dimension of human life’ and as a ‘modality of social action or of being in the world’ (Lambek 2010a). In other words, I look at ethics from the viewpoint of practice, building, more specifically, on what Sherry Ortner called the historic turn in practice theory, or the observation (built on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Marshall Sahlins) that ‘the playing out of the effects of culturally organized practices is essential processual and often very slow’ (Ortner 2005:9). This is not so much a matter of dialectics between practice and history (or long durée), but an acknowledgement that practice is history.

I will return to these theoretical considerations in more detail in the third section. Firstly, let me become somewhat more explicit about the way in which my focus on ethical improvement in Aceh builds on, and is also different from, other discussions of Islam in Aceh and Southeast Asia.

Islam, adat, and the ethnography of Aceh and Muslim Southeast Asia

Studies of Islam have a tendency to reify the relationship between religious authority and the state. This is particularly true for the study of Muslim Southeast Asia, which has been influenced for a long time by the view that Islam is an essentially ‘alien’ trait of indigenous societies. Thus, early Islamisation of Southeast Asia is commonly termed in political and economic terms, reflecting a process of early modern Southeast Asian states adopting Islam to facilitate global trade and political alliances. In contrast, Islam has fallen largely outside the gaze of anthropologists seeking to discover the ‘true’ cultures underneath the ‘veneer’ of outward Islamic practice (Gibson 2000). However, to some extent Aceh seems to have functioned as the ‘exception that proves the rule’. Students of Aceh have typically asked how religious leaders tried to make the state more Islamic, and how their lay, or ‘secular’ counterparts in turn tried to ‘manage’ the Islamic factor.

Up until now, only a few studies have taken Acehnese religiosity seriously as a research subject. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, James Siegel, and Jacqueline Siapno have all concerned themselves with the relationship between a regional, partly pre-Islamic Acehnese ‘cultural identity’, and the transformative forces of Islamic scripturalism. In particular, these authors have pointed out the role of adat as a moral system ‘alternative’, in certain respects, to Islam. I will therefore begin this section by briefly explaining the meaning of adat and the social role of the ulama, and then move on to discuss the three most important works on Islam in Aceh to date.
Adat in Southeast Asia refers to local, ‘ethnically’ or ‘territorially’ based hybrid structures of moral values, traditional customs and legal institutions, based on a variety of ideas and social arrangements related to family, kinship, ritual, reciprocity, leadership, communal responsibility and conflict. Colonial scholars used to treat adat as ‘closed off’ normative systems, ultimately irreconcilable to ‘universalizing’ religions such as Islam or Christianity. After independence, this view was generally rejected. More recently, scholars have shifted the debate away from the ‘nature’ of adat, toward the question how, in different contexts, adat has been deployed to advance particular interests, by the government, local community leaders, or by ordinary people (including the ‘marginalised’ or the ‘powerless’). Especially interesting, in this respect, is the suggestion that, in recent decades, next to a ‘religious revival’ a ‘revival of tradition’ has occurred, revealed by an increase in political claims related to ethnic or regional identities and loyalties.

People in Aceh speak of adat in a number of different ways. In the first place, they refer to adat in the context of kinship relations. Although Acehnese society has incorporated forms of institutionalized, male-centred Islamic law since at least the sixteenth century, the Acehnese kinship system is traditionally matrifocal in character, which means that houses and key productive resources are inherited by daughters. Traditionally, men move into the house of their wives after getting married, which is still a common practice today. Secondly, people refer to adat as laying down the communal rituals marking important events, such as birth, death, marriage, or the harvest. One of the most commonly practised rituals typically recognised as adat is the practice of peusijeuk, or ‘cooling down’, of things that are ‘new’ and thus ‘hot’ (such as newborn children, but also, for instance, a recently purchased car or motorcycle). The exact ways in which rituals like peusijeuk ought to be performed (in terms of appropriate clothes worn and objects used) are place-specific. Thus, people might claim that they are unable to say ‘what is adat’ in another district, or even a neighbouring village. The significant quality of adat is that ‘it is different everywhere’ and handed over locally, from generation to generation. Thirdly, traditional village leadership is organised, at least in part, on basis of adat institutions, some of which have an Islamic root. Keuchik, the indication of village headman (or – woman) is an adat title, just like village imam (teungku meunasah) and the village ‘council of elders’ (teuha peut, lit. the ‘four elders’). Acehnese also recognise adat institutions on a supra-village (mukim, ‘district’, or nanggroe [negeri], ‘state’) level, as associated with pre-colonial rule. Fourthly, adat refers to the ways in which internal conflicts are solved within local communities. Thus, people often argue that it is not necessary to involve the police or the (secular or Islamic) court as long as it is possible to deal with a local conflict ‘by means of adat’ (secara adat). Finally, it is commonly understood that, to have ‘knowledge’ of adat means to be ‘cultured’ or ‘refined’. Thus, having no manners is equated to ‘knowing no adat’ (A: hana teupeuh adat).

As we shall see, scholars of Aceh have shown a particular interest in the relationship between local expressions of Islam, Acehnese traditions of matrifocality, and the gendered patterns arising from this relationship during different periods of time. While traditionally girls remain to be a member of their families’ core structure throughout their lives, boys move out of their home upon reaching puberty, after which they develop avoidance relationships with their fathers and their fathers in law (a pattern

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described in detail by Siegel (1969, Ch. 7). A practice related to these gender differences is merantau (travelling away from one’s place of birth to look for work, knowledge, and life experience), a rite the passage crucial in the process of reaching ‘manhood’, and dependent on the traditional capacity of women to provide for their own subsistence. While these aspects will be discussed in different contexts throughout this dissertation, it is worthwhile to foreshadow that gender patterns – and the theme of Acehnese masculinity in particular – have been discussed predominantly in the context of (explaining) religious renewal and/or (the politics of) armed struggle.

The most important representatives of traditional religious authority in Aceh are the ulama, scholars of Islamic law, and leaders of religious boarding schools (dayah), which are spread all over Aceh, especially in rural areas.¹¹ In Southeast Asia, the standardisation of the curriculum in religious schools (through the canonisation of textual curricula and skills like Quranic recitation, interpretation, and jurisprudence) began in the nineteenth and twentieth century, which was much later than in the Islamic centre regions, where this process began well before the sixteenth century (Van Bruinessen 1990, 1994; Zaman 2002). This may also explain why the clashes between ‘traditionalists’ (kaum tua) and ‘modernists’ (kaum muda) were particularly bitter in this part of the world.¹² An important source of contestation was the reverence for particular individual ulama – during their lives or after their deaths – as ‘saints’. Modernist reformist objected against the practice of worshiping saints, as they saw in this a form of polytheism (shirk). Also, they rejected the belief that the deceased are able to ‘intercede’ between humans and God, thus turning against a range of connected (mystical) practices associated with the practice of visiting ‘holy graves’ (ziarah). Not all reforms proposed by modernist reformers led to contestation, however. An often overlooked development is that many ‘traditional’ pesantren in the twentieth century were rather quick to follow the modernist example of offering higher Islamic education to girls, a trend which has continued into the present. Today, almost half of the students in Indonesian pesantren are girls and women (Hefner 2009: 63), while some schools have been founded and led by female ulama (Kloos 2010; Srimulyani 2012).

People in Aceh roughly distinguish between two types of dayah: dayah salafi, which operate an (almost) fully religious curriculum based on the study of kitab kuning (classical texts, literally ‘yellow books’), and dayah moderen (modern dayah), or dayah terpadu (mixed dayah), which are based on a partly religious, partly secular or ‘state’ curriculum.¹³ When people in Aceh talk about the ulama, they may refer to Islamic scholars generally, leaders of dayah, professors at the Islamic State Institute (IAIN) Ar-Raniry in Banda Aceh, or members of the state ulama council (the Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, MPU). Depending on the context, however, they may signify in a more narrow sense the leaders of dayah salafi, sometimes called ulama dayah, who represent a specific ‘traditional’ space in Acehnese society. In the dayah salafi, the medium

¹¹ The institution of the dayah is similar to the Javanese pesantren and the Malay pondok. Like in Aceh, in this dissertation the terms dayah and pesantren are used more or less interchangeably.

¹² See Laffan 2003, 2011; Taufik Abdullah 1971; Roff 1967, Ch.3. This is not to say that ‘traditionalists’ represent a static tradition. The corpus of kitab kuning (the collection of classical texts which form the curriculum of traditional pesantren) has changed considerably over the past century (Van Bruinessen 1990). Continuous contestations have also taken place among the ranks of the ‘traditionalists’ in Indonesia (for example within the Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s largest Islamic mass movement; see Fealy and Barton 1996).

¹³ Most religious boarding schools fall in either one of these categories. There are a few exceptions, however, such as the Acehnese branch of Gontor, an educational organisation founded in Java, which operates a radically modernist curriculum based exclusively on English and Arabic language instruction.
The first scholar who gave substantial attention to the relationship between Islam and adat in Aceh was the Dutch orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje. Trained in theology and Arabic, Snouck Hurgronje travelled to the Hejaz in the 1880s, after which he published an innovative ethnography of Islam and everyday life in the city of Mecca (Snouck Hurgronje 1889). He started his work in the Netherlands East Indies in the early 1990s, spending around two years studying networks of religious scholars and mystics in Java (Laffan 2011:147-57). In 1891 he travelled to war-torn Aceh by order of the Dutch colonial government, which had commissioned from him a (secret) report about popular Acehnese sentiments and inter-elite relationships within the Acehnese community. Although this information was meant to advance Dutch prospects for ending the war, his ambition as a scholar went further, and a few years later he published the first major ethnographic study of Acehnese society (Snouck Hurgronje 1893-95).

While this study ranged widely, from the history of the sultanate to the study of literature, games and plays, a major theme was the ambivalent position in Acehnese society of the ulama. Snouck Hurgronje discovered that, by taking up both the spiritual and the physical leadership in the war against the Dutch, some ulama had obtained unprecedented authority among the Acehnese population. He also noted that many ulama were frustrated about the lack of interest shown by lay Acehnese in the ‘proper rules’ of Islam. His explanation for this ‘disregard’ by ordinary Acehnese for normative Islam was the adherence to Islam and adat as a joint ‘foundation for Acehnese life’. The Acehnese saw Islam and adat as ‘inseparable’ systems, but in practice, he claimed, they did not hold Islamic law very highly, for adat often turned out to be the ‘mistress’ and religious law ‘her submissive slave’ (Ibid.:1.157). Analytically, Snouck Hurgronje thus distinguished sharply between adat and Islamic orthodoxy as inherently opposing frameworks.

In The rope of God (1969), James Siegel described the emergence of the Acehnese reformist movement PUSA (Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh, or All-Acehnese Association of Ulama, founded 1939), and its effects on village society from the 1930s until the 1950s. Siegel spent two years conducting ethnographic fieldwork in North Aceh, where the PUSA was strongest. In his view, the appeal of the movement lay in the compatibility of the ‘universal’ claims associated with Islamic modernism and local, cultural perceptions of masculinity. For Acehnese men, Islamic modernism was attractive because it offered them a means of ‘escape’ from their relatively inferior position in Aceh’s matrifocal society. Siegel referred to Snouck Hurgronje, as he wrote that, in Aceh, men were essentially ‘guests in their own house’ (Siegel 1969: 55, quoting Snouck Hurgronje 1893-95:I.370, nt.1). Matrifocality and locality – forming the major basis of Acehnese social organization in the nineteenth century – were both fundamentally hostile to men. The world of the

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14 To illustrate this, Snouck Hurgronje referred to popular Acehnese expressions such as ‘religious law and adat cannot be separated, nor can the essence and character of God’ (A: hukum ngon adat han jeut cere lagee dat ngon sifeut) and ‘the village head is (our) father, the religious teacher (our) mother’ (A: keuchik eumbah, teungku ma) (Ibid.:1.68, 74).
pesantren (religious schools), in contrast, was seen as a ‘world of men under the unity of Islam’, thus acting as a temporary escape. PUSA offered a whole new kind of escape, as it sought to dissolve these traditional bonds altogether (Siegel 1969:67). Islamic modernism was thus presented by Siegel mainly as a male route to self-expression.

Jacqueline Siapno conducted fieldwork in Aceh under very difficult circumstances in the 1990s, when the civil war between the GAM and the military reached an unprecedented intensity of violence. Just like Siegel, she concentrated on the gendered organisation of Acehnese society. Siapno referred to normative Islam as a typically ‘urban’ tradition. Rooted in PUSA and other (Indonesian and transnational) movements showcasing ‘strong attempts at purification’, this tradition was seen by Siapno as fundamentally opposed to the traditionally strong position of women in Acehnese society (Siapno 2002:36-37). She argued that the autonomies of Acehnese women were put under pressure by a combination of three different, but equally patriarchal socio-political systems, namely modernist Islamic scripturalism, the Indonesian New Order state, and western (inspired) ‘human rights regimes’ (Ibid.:198). Like Siegel, she emphasized the masculine character of Islamic modernism. Instead of presenting its emergence as male liberation, however, she focused on female subjugation through the disciplining of women in the name of scripturalist Islam.\(^{15}\) To strengthen her case, she distinguished sharply between a ‘traditionalist, syncretic and matrifocal’ version of Islam as representing rural village life, and a modernist version of Islam ‘with strong attempts at purification’, which was dominant in urban centres (Ibid.:36-37). She observed that urban women had become more restricted (for example with regard to nudity, modesty, and mobility), while they had a greater tendency than women in rural areas to defend their Islamic identity against ‘outside threats’, including non-Acehnese Indonesians (such as the military and non-Muslim foreigners).

These three studies, which came about in very different time frames and scholarly traditions, have each contributed in a significant way to our understanding of Acehnese society. At the same time, their explanatory frameworks share a common root, as they maintain a rather distinct dichotomy opposing a traditional, place-specific cultural model (typically glossed adat) to a modern, more or less formalised form of Islamic purist reform. Snouck Hurgronje was bluntly dismissive of Acehnese traditionalism, as he contrasted the conservative and ‘heretical’ practices of Acehnese villagers to the moralistic views of religious scholars, and to the progressive currents he had observed in Java and the Middle East. Siegel maintained this stringent binary model of the ‘traditional’ world of the village, dominated by women as guardians of pre-Islamic customs, and the progressive, future-oriented world of men, concentrated in the world of the pesantren. Siapno perpetuated the dichotomy by extending it into a rather simplistic contrast between village and city, adat and Islam, tradition and modernity, male and female.

In the context of everyday morality, most people in Aceh reject a sharp or uncompromising division between Islam and adat. My interlocutors typically explained to me that Islam and adat ‘cannot be separated’ (tidak bisa terpisah), and that ‘adat is in harmony with Islam’ (sudah sesuai). Village traditions and rituals were commonly presided over by dignitaries who were seen, simultaneously, as ‘Islamic leaders’ (tokoh Islam) and as ‘adat leaders’ (tokoh adat). Adat and Islam were thus seen as

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\(^{15}\) While Acehnese women were thus ‘silenced at different levels’, according to Siapno this did not mean that they were left completely without agency. Thus she observed that Acehnese women, particularly those living in rural areas, had at their disposal a variety of cultural repertoires, including orally disseminated literary traditions, through which traditional female power was reproduced, helping them to counter and resist different attempts at subordination (Siapno 2002:83-84, 89-107).
complementary, rather than opposed, moral frameworks. People did, however, distinguish clearly between Islam and adat as sources of legal solutions. Thus, hukum adat (‘adat law’) was seen as something different from hukum Shari’a (‘Islamic law’) and hukum negara (‘state law’), with the first referring to mediation by village leaders, and the second and third to formal court procedures. The relationship between adat and Islam in the legal sphere has been theorised in a sophisticated way by John Bowen in his work on Gayo society (Bowen 1993, 2003), and there is no need to engage in an elaborate discussion here (I will regularly refer to this work in the chapters to follow). Suffice it to say, that Bowen focused on the formation of ‘modernist’ and ‘traditionalist’ dispositions, and their manifestation in contemporary, public dimensions of moral and legal reasoning.

I will not suggest to discard these contrasts. Clearly they must have meant something important to the people figuring in all of the works referred to above. What I do object against, is the tendency to advance the dichotomy between ‘modernists’ and ‘traditionalists’, ‘scripturalists’ and ‘syncretists’, or ‘Islam’ and ‘adat’ as the main, dominant frame for explaining religious diversity among Muslims in Southeast Asia. In the remainder of this section I will point out two major avenues that scholars have gone to complicate these dichotomies. The first relates to a more dynamic, and more sophisticated understanding of gender representations, while the second is focused on the cultural construction of class.

Some of the work discussed above – particularly that of Siapno – may be read in the context of a rather extensive tradition of scholarship which centralises the tension between Islam as a universal, male-centred ‘world’ religion on the one hand, and a localised, female-centred tradition of communication with the ‘spirit world’ on the other. Someone who has worked to complicate this dichotomy is Michael Peletz. In his study of gender representations in the Malay state of Negeri Sembilan (1996), he focused on the Malay kinship system as a major conceptual window for approaching the relationship between ‘pan-Islamic’ ideologies and ‘alternative’ ideologies, including the ‘body of cultural codes glossed adat’ (Ibid.:12). After discussing the fundamental differences between Islamic and non-Islamic ideologies (in Malay as well as other Muslim contexts), he drew attention to their ontological similarities, noting that ‘alternative’ (indigenous) discourses on gender often seem to be ‘wholesale inversions’ of their (pan-)Islamic counterparts. ‘Circumstances such as these’, he stated, ‘attest to the pervasiveness of ideologies inasmuch as they make quite clear the rather remarkable degree to which dissension and subversion are contained within the very frameworks against which they are deployed; put differently, they show how such frameworks severely limit the possibilities of “answering (or arguing) back”’ (Ibid.:348-49). Rather than being satisfied with the conclusion that ideologies ‘necessarily breed their own inversions’, however, Peletz turned to ‘social sources of ambivalence’ in order to understand the factors that

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16 It is often commented upon, that, compared to more patriarchal social arrangements in the Middle East, India, or China, women in Southeast Asian societies have a relatively strong position. According to Barbara Andaya, this particular ‘trait’ goes back to at least the early modern period, when attitudes towards gender in the Malay-Muslim archipelago were, generally speaking, ‘favourable to women’. She argued that this difference ‘stemmed from socioeconomic environments rather than “some traditional culture”’ (B.W. Andaya 2006; cf. Reid 1993:161-64, and K. Robinson 2009). It has been argued that, in Indonesia, the belief in different spiritual ‘forms’ has developed, over time, into a ‘fairly stable compromise (…) in which the spirit cults became the “religion of women” and Islam the “religion of men”’ (Gibson 2000:62). See also Hadler 2008 on Minangkabau.
‘(re)produce’ and the factors that ‘constrain’ alternative representations of the social world.17

A second domain in which the divide between ‘universalising’ Islamic norms and ‘localised’ traditional systems has been constructed and contested is that of economic change, an approach which has been particularly important in the context of tying the emerging Asian middle class to the global Islamic resurgence. Recently, scholars have asked how increasing wealth, social mobility, consumerism and urban living explain the popularity (and particularities) of pious lifestyles (Fischer 2008), forms of ‘Muslim’ entrepreneurship (Sloane 1999), ethics-based industrial production (Rudnyckyj 2010), and concerns related to spiritual emptiness, ‘moral panic’ and nihilism (Fealy 2008; van Leeuwen 2011). Put briefly, new attempts have been made to draw causal relations between expressions of piety and the economic ethics associated with ‘high-modern’ or ‘post-modern’ capitalism (Hefner 2010:1037-39). This literature is rooted, at least partly, in a tradition of Weberian anthropology concerned with the relationship between Islamic scripturalist reformism and modernity, as popularised in the first place by Clifford Geertz (1960, 1968).

A particularly interesting investigation of the relationship between religious practice and class identity is Johan Fischer’s ethnography of an affluent Kuala Lumpur suburb, Taman Tun Dr Ismail (TTDI).18 In his analysis of suburban piety, Fischer identified two core processes, namely the ‘nationalisation’ of Islam, based on the officialisation by the state of ‘correct’ Islamic consumption as an inextricable part of a Malay-centred modernisation, and secondly ‘halalisation’, as a collection of acts of valorisation by Malay Muslims of commodities (such as food and dress, but also cosmetics, houses, and cars) as either *halal* (‘allowed’) or *haram* (‘forbidden’). One of Fischer’s main focal points is the connection between consumption and the discursive construction of the family as a national ideal. In state ideology, discursive constructions of family life function as a counterweight against the ‘perils and moral panic’ associated with younger generations and modern city life. The feature making Fischer’s work especially interesting, is that, in contrast to the majority of the literature about the Islamic ‘revival’, he engages explicitly with the question of what it meant for the residents of TTDI to be ‘middle class’. His interlocutors confidently identified themselves as Melayu Baru, or ‘New Malays’, a term rooted in controversial state programs designed to engineer a Malay bourgeoisie countering ‘Chinese’ economic dominance.

Just like Peletz, Fischer emphasized the ambivalent ways in which many people regarded ‘officialised’ norms. While most of his interlocutors were unaffiliated with a particular religious or political current or movement, ‘state’ and ‘public’ Islam were clearly important for the ways in which they formed opinions, approached dilemmas, and

17 Crucial, in this respect, is ideology’s relationship to kinship: ‘One point that cannot be overemphasized (...) is that kinship as a moral system necessarily cuts both ways. Kinship’s double-edged nature stems partly from the fact that it brings with it heavy moral entailments in the form of expectations and obligations which are in many cases extremely burdensome if not impossible to fulfil’ (Peletz 1996:351; cf. Peletz 1988).

18 The location is important. A symbol of high-modern suburbia, TTDI also lies less than a stone’s throw away from Sungai Pencala, a rural Malay ‘reserve’, which, since the 1970s, has accommodated the Darul Arqam commune, a group of pious Muslims attempting to emulate the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Equally important is that the group pioneered what Fischer calls the ‘halal industry’, or the increasingly lucrative production and marketing of products branded as ‘permitted by Islam’. Darul Arqam was banned by the government in 1994, for comprising a deviationist cult, but according to Fischer Arqam members still represent a ‘unique visibility’ in TTDI residents’ everyday lives, thus inciting pondering about what should, and what should not, be regarded as ‘proper Islamic consumption’ (1-4).
discarded, preserved, or changed religious practices. Both focused on kinship and family as a critical domain of moral self-making, and both attached importance to the everyday ambivalence involved in approaching moral positions and dilemmas. While these studies have been a great source of inspiration for me, I also argue that, in order to study the problem of religious diversity, a focus on either gender or class is insufficient, and that it is important to ask how the religious agencies of ordinary Muslims inform practice across socio-economic cleavages, and across gendered constructions of the social world. In the next section, I will further elaborate my central approach, framing the problem of explaining diversity more squarely in terms of religious practice, and the negotiation of individual space for moral action.

Religious agency, authority, and the state: an interactive approach

At the start of this chapter, I indicated the need to move beyond the primacy of the ‘legal’ and the ‘political’, without negating or underestimating either one of these domains. The challenge, then, is to design an approach which helps us identify and analyse the contested space between the moral spheres of state, religious authority, and individual religious agency. This approach should take seriously the attempts by agents of the state and representatives of religious authority to penetrate, alter and restrict individual spaces, but also be sensitive to the ways in which individuals appropriate, and make use of, state and otherwise officialised norms and discourses to achieve their goals and fulfil their passions. I propose three specific steps to arrive at such an approach. The first step constitutes an outline of these three moral spheres, and the interactions between them. The second step is to put this model into motion by placing it in a historical context. The third step adds an ethnographic dimension, which is tuned to the description and analysis of contingent routines and practices, and the important role in these interactions of moral ambiguities.

As for the first step, let me shed some light on the way in which I understand the interactive spheres of state, authority, and individual. With regard to the state, I follow Joshua Barker and Gerry Van Klinken (2009), who, in turn following Migdal, approach the Indonesian state as simultaneously a ‘system’ and as an ‘idea’ (cf. Schulte Nordholt 2003b). To study the state as a system involves ‘disaggregating the state, lowering the level of analysis below the national, studying interactions anthropologically, and looking for social forces rather than static structures’. Studying the state as an idea requires from researchers ‘an exercise in unmasking an ideology’ (Barker and Van Klinken 2009:40). What I find particularly useful about this approach, is the conceptual backing it offers for an understanding of the state as a means rather than an actor. The state-system and the state-idea are constructs, which evolve because groups and individuals take an interest in the using the state to a variety of ends. Using the state may mean to deploy laws or institutions (for example to coerce people into changing their behaviour, or to gain access to particular resources), or it may mean to deploy a language or idiom (for example about the ‘correct’ form of Islam) in order to realise strategic positions, mobilize or persuade, or provide a person or institution with legitimacy.

A similar view applies, to an extent, to the study of religious authority, and to the hierarchies of religious institutions and representatives of religious knowledge. Islam lacks a strong institutional framework for centralizing authority (such as for example a church). Thus, in this approach I concentrate on the role of the ulama as the main bearers of normative tradition, and on the nature of religious knowledge as a repertoire that may be used for stating norms (constraining individuals) as well as claiming space (creating agency).
Finally, bookshelves full have been written about the historical, sociological, and philosophical qualities of the individual and the ‘self’. Suffice it to say that, generally, I follow Charles Taylor (1989) when he argues that questions of identity cannot be viewed separately from the (historical) formation of moral subjectivity, and that the remaking of both ‘self’ and ‘morality’ are key traits of what we call ‘modernity’. I agree with Craig Calhoun’s (1991) argument that, although Taylor’s work is based primarily on the thoughts and ideas of ‘Great Men’, his discursive approach to the self as a moral subject offers a particularly good starting point for enriching our understanding of identity and human agency.

Of course, in reality there is continuous overlap between these three spheres. Lay Muslims may, at a particular point in their lives, come to be regarded by their environment as religious authorities. Ulama may become agents of the state. And agents of the state are always also individuals, who, just like everyone else, may reflect on their ‘moral selves’. My main interest, then, lies not in these spheres as such, but on the processes of interaction defining their relationship. It is important to emphasize that these connections are dissimilar in nature, and that the ‘model’ is therefore asymmetrical. Contrary to individuals, the state and representatives of religious authority claim the right to advance generalizing or universalizing norms. Thus, the relationship between the state and organized religion is primarily one of balancing power. The state can be made more or less ‘religious’ in nature, while religious authority can be more or less ‘officialised’ or regulated. In contrast, the relationship between these two forces and ‘individual spaces’ is dual in nature. Key terms, in this respect, are the opposing vectors of control and aspiration. While the need to exert control motivates agents of the state and representatives of religious authority to define norms, and thus intervene in the spaces of individual people, aspiration (which can be ‘this-worldly’ and ‘other-worldly’ or spiritual), constitutes the main motive for individuals to use, upset, divert, transform, adapt or submit to the practice of stating norms on basis of particular emotions or dispositions. Thus, schematically the proposed approach looks like this:
There is, however, a second possibility. Religious agency may be viewed as accommodating two different strategies of asserting, protecting or enlarging individual space. Individuals may either directly address the realms of the state or religious authority on basis of aspirational models (such as shown in the model above), or they may, indirectly, use one of these realms to influence their relationship with the other. Thus, the second possibility looks like this:

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  INDIVIDUAL
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  'WORLDLY' ASPIRATION
  'SPIRITUAL' ASPIRATION
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  STATE
  REL. AUTHORITY
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Of course, this double-strategy approach is useful only when turned from a static account of relations into a dynamic reflections of interactions. The second step, therefore, is to put this model into motion. Generally speaking, one could say that religious norms are adapted when, for example, political and economic configurations change, new religious ideas take root, or physical and technological circumstances change. Norms may be enforced through (the possibility of) violence or coercion, or by the use of the legal domain. This is true for the ulama, who are the experts in interpreting Islamic law, but also for the state, which (contrary to the Weberian idea about the monopoly on violence) centres on the administration of law rather than control of violence (Cribb 2011:31). Just like the state and the ulama, ordinary Muslims react on changing circumstances. To act 'as an individual', however, involves the conceptual sphere of human emotions. Let me try to work out the historical qualities of these interactions in a somewhat more concrete form.

Rather than an aspect of particular Islamic societies, the tension between political control and individual assertiveness should be seen as central to Islamic culture, for it is never fully decided whether an Islamic society is to be reached through the hearts of individuals or through the controls of the state; whether Islam is a religion of individuals or a political society' (Lapidus 2001:50). Throughout history, Muslims have considered different political and legal arrangements to uphold religious unity. Questions about the
right to impose a particular orthodoxy, or about the basis for individual Muslims to claim that right for themselves, take centre stage in these discussions. Generally speaking, two major strands of debate have dominated this discussion. The first debate deals with the relationship between ‘imitation’ (taqlid) and ‘independent reasoning’ (ijtihad) as sources of legal authority. The second debate is existential, rather than legalistic in nature, as it centres on the tension in Islam between ‘inner’ (batin) and ‘outer’ (zahir) dimensions of faith.

IJTIHAD and TAQLID are Islamic doctrines that deal with the question how Muslims should appreciate dogmas. Put briefly, ijtihad comes down to ‘exerting one’s effort in order to derive from the bases of the law (adillah) an opinion concerning a legal rule’, while its complement taqlid refers to ‘accepting an opinion concerning a legal rule without knowledge of its bases’ (Peters 1980:135). From the early days of Islam, Muslim scholars have referred to taqlid to argue that Muslims are obliged to accept established dogmas without further questioning. Critics of this view have referred to the term ijtihad to argue that Muslims with sufficient knowledge of theology, or even lay Muslims, are not just allowed, but actually required to engage in the practice of legal reasoning by scrutinising the sources, and critically evaluating existing jurisprudence.19

In many studies of Islamic society, the Quran and the Hadith are bracketed together as the ‘fundamental sources’ of Islam, forming the substance of Islamic law (Shari’a). Yet, as Vincent Cornell (1999) has explained, these sources are actually quite different in nature. The Quran, as the uncontested word of God, represents a ‘logocentric’, or word-centred approach to Islam. The Hadith, in contrast, convey the words and experiences of the Prophet Muhammad as an example for ‘appropriate behaviour’, and therefore constitute a contested source. Today, Cornell argues, ‘Islam is more than anything else a “nomocentric” or law-centred religion’ (Ibid.:90). Nonetheless, the more emotional, ‘logocentric’ perspective has remained essential. Throughout history, examples can be found of those branding dangerous, ‘unlawful’, or ‘un-Islamic’ the practices of Sufis (mystics), ascetics, or particular sects engaged, one way or another, in an ‘inner’ search for divine knowledge, energy, or enlightenment. ‘Shari’a-minded’ (Hodgson 1974) reformers have typically called upon the ‘law’ to articulate their disapproval or condemnation of heresies such as the (wilful) neglect of worship (ibadah), idolatry, and polytheism (shirk). At the same time, there have been numerous examples of Sufis who have questioned, or even openly neglected, the ‘obligatory’ elements of Islamic ritual, including the five Pillars of Islam or other aspects of the Shari’a.20

19 Scholars (Muslim and non-Muslim) have long thought that, at some point around the tenth century CE, the ‘gates of ijtihad (bab al-ijtihad)’ had been closed (see, e.g., Schacht 1964:69-70). Today, most historians of Islam take a more nuanced view, arguing that the debate has always been a revolving point for doctrinal discussion, although fluctuating, perhaps, in intensity. See, e.g., Berkey 2003:219-20; Feener 2007:24; Peters 1980:131-32; Wael Hallaq 1984.

20 See, e.g., Beatty 1999; Van Bruinessen and Howell 2007; Cornell 1999; Ewing 1997; Pinault 2001. Around the turn of the twelfth century, this controversy inspired the Sunni theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali to formulate a judgment, which was aimed at reconciling Sufi practice with the Shari’a. Al-Ghazali argued that the ‘mystical path’ (tariqa), although the most important channel for obtaining ‘true’ knowledge of God, may not be latched upon by individual believers to exempt themselves from fulfilling the most basic Quranic requirements of faith, including the acceptance that ‘God is one’ (tawhid), and the compulsory acts of worship. Ever since, the ‘Ghazalian’ compromise has been the object of fierce attacks, the most notorious being the assault of the Arabian scholar Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, who called for a radical ‘return’ to the letter of the Quran and the life of the Prophet as a model for the life of individual Muslims, and a rejection of mystical practices recalling a divine lineage or energy, or a personal, emotional connection with God. Wahhabism, the central doctrine of the modern state of Saudi Arabia (which controls the heartland of Islam) is a political manifestation of a broader ideological
Traditionally, the experts of Islamic law are the ulama, plural to alim, ‘person of knowledge’. In the pre-modern period, this group acquired near total control over the canonisation and distribution of texts, making possible ‘a growing uniformity of Islamic belief and practice throughout the vast area in which Muslims lived’ (Bulliet 1994:21). In the late nineteenth century a number of reform-minded ulama urged Muslims to accelerate the process of modernisation by enhancing their mastery over both secular knowledge (such as natural science or language) and religious knowledge, stating that Islamic institutions of learning should be equipped to offer both. A particular concern for the Islamic modernist movement was the ‘neglect’ of the law of God, and the perception that Islamic societies indulged in superstitions and ‘innovations’ (bida). Sufism – regarded as a distraction of Muslims from their actual duties at best, and as a dangerous form of deviancy at worst – was a primary target of these reformers. Ijtihad was an important concept, offering a counterweight against the ‘imitation’ of deviant ideas and practices.21

The Islamic modernist movement is regarded as the ideological root of many contemporary Islamist organisations. It is important, however, not to reduce this ‘spirit of reform’ to political expressions alone (Bubalo and Fealy 2005). A particularly interesting interpretation has been offered by Francis Robinson (1997), who, in his writings about Muslim South Asia, argued that the political domination of the Muslim world by non-Muslim forces led to a period of existential reflection among scholars and intellectuals about the meaning of their faith, and their place as Muslims in the world at large. In result, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were marked not only by political upheavals, but also by a fundamental shift from an ‘other-worldly’ to a ‘this-worldly’ piety. Contingent on this shift, an ‘activist’ Islam emerged, directed less at the preservation or sense of community than on the personal responsibility of individual Muslims to safeguard their own salvation. Rather than a ‘reaction’ to western modernity, this sense of renewal was rooted deeply in the Islamic past, and the ‘inner compulsion of Muslims to make their faith live to the best possible effect’ (F. Robinson 2008:260). A central dimension of this process was the ‘inward turn’, as a result of which ‘the new type of reflective believer meditated increasingly on the self and the shortcomings of the self’.22

Robinson’s view raises questions as much as it provides explanations. One may wonder, for example, to what extent this ‘new’ activist attitude was shared by Muslims from different (gender, class, or ideological) backgrounds. Robinson himself noted that a focus on ‘willing’ Islam summons critical questions about the ‘weight on women’, as well as the ‘powerful concern to assert and to police the boundaries of difference’ (F. Robinson 1997:14). At the same time, it is evident that the Islamic modernist movement was driven for an important part by the middle class, or in Robinson’s own words, by ‘people commanding modern science and technology, [and] modern legal and bureaucratic systems (...) [who] wanted, and still seek, to fashion the world in their own (bourgeois) image’ (F. Robinson 2003:56). In addition, one may note that Robinson’s argument is based predominantly on the views and writings of figures from higher social and educated movement directed at the purification of Islam, commonly referred to as salafism. See Cornell 1999. With regard to Indonesia, see Fealy and Bubalo 2005.

21 Feener 2007:24-53; Metcalf 1982; Riddell 2001:88-89. One implication of this was the rejection by reformers of the differences in interpretation associated with the madhhab, or ‘schools’ of Muslim legal thought. Another implication was the stance that individual Muslims should be armed against the temptation of imitation through further standardisation of religious curricula and skills.

22 By this, Robinson did not mean that a focus on the self did not exist before the nineteenth century. Rather, he argued that, instead of being limited to the confines of particular mystical practices, ‘self-consciousness and self-examination were encouraged in this period to become widespread’ (F. Robinson 1997:12).
echelons, who have the means and the tools to develop an ‘activist’ attitude in the first place. By this I do not mean to say that the study of these ideas should be replaced or ‘countered’ by a view of history ‘from below’ (or ‘above’, for that matter), but that we should follow up on these important insights by designing an approach to the construction of Muslim subjectivity which is more inclusive, and more sensitive to the ambiguities of moral authority and individual morality.

Religious uniformisation was an inextricable element of the advent of a global modernity. Crucial, in this respect, was the role of an increasingly centralised, uniform, and bureaucratic state (Bayly 2004:336-43). However, the most important impact of Islamic modernism was not the call for standardisation as such (for Islam has been going through a process of ‘homogenization’ during a much longer period), but the conviction, advanced by reformist ulama and agents of the modern state alike, that religious education should be regarded as an instrument of change (Berkey 2007:41-49). In pre-modern Muslim societies, the power vested in education was typically framed in conservative discourse, directed at consensus, preservation and stability rather than social or political transformation. This changed in the nineteenth century. ‘Whatever one wants Muslim society to become, the principal instrument of coercion, influence, and change is to be the schools; education has become the leading edge in various efforts to transform Islam and the modern world’ (Ibid.:41). The idea that education constituted the main domain in which the ‘battles over politics, over Muslim identities, and over what a Muslim modernity should look like’ would be decided, was radically new.

A powerful demonstration of this process is Gregory Starrett’s study of Islamic education in Egypt. In the centuries before modern European imperialism, Egyptian Islam became increasingly ‘objectified’ (Eickelman and Piscatori [1996:37-45] have also used this term), a process defined by Starrett as ‘the growing consciousness on the part of Muslims that Islam is a coherent system of practices and beliefs, rather than merely an unexamined and unexaminable way of life’ (Starrett 1998:8-9). British colonial administrators sought to accelerate, rather than curb this process of ‘objectification’. In privileging modern religious schools over ‘traditional’ forms of religious training, agents of the colonial state and its postcolonial successor sought an opportunity for ‘nearly total control over the inner lives of Egyptians’. These policies were accepted by the Egyptian middle class, who saw in them a route to emancipation. In the postcolonial period the middle class experience of social mobility became the ‘official norm’. Still, state power was more modest than many British and Egyptian administrators might have envisioned. The connection between the officialisation of religious instruction and access to state-directed careers were less evident to a majority of ordinary Egyptians than to the middle class. In the second half of the twentieth century, a period tainted by increasingly violent oppression at the hands of the state, a growing number of Egyptians started to question the legitimacy of official institutions, explaining the success of religious subversive groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. The outcome was thus ambiguous, in the sense that state educational policies led both to a centralisation of religious authority, and to a process of increasing religious fragmentation.

This ambiguity points at the need to rethink the nature of both ‘religious authority’ and the ‘state’. The reformist currents, while inspiring the ‘inward turn’, also incited discourses of discipline and constraint, particularly through their emphasis on Islamic law, both with regard to private life and with regard to institutions and public space. Importantly, these discourses have been adopted, in various ways, by the secular state, in
Indonesia as well as elsewhere in the Muslim world. There is a marked continuity, moreover, in terms of the way in which the state in Indonesia, from the colonial era up to the twentieth century, has regarded ‘religion’ (agama) as an ordering principle, that is, ordering ‘the population into manageable and mobilizable units’ (Spyer 1996:192).

While these are all crucial observations with regard to understanding how the state functions, and affects human lives, the (discursive, judicial or physical) power of the state should not be seen as all-pervasive (Kloos 2012; Peletz 2011). It is crucial, therefore, to investigate not only how Islam has been subjected to a process of domestication by the state, but also how individual Muslims have set limits to this process, either by resisting it, or by becoming part of it. The state and the ulama do not represent monolithic forces. They do, however, represent recognisable moral regimes, constituting a generically applied form of control, based on a (more or less contested) practice of defining orthodoxy. The question, then, is how to study the dynamic relationship between these normative forces and the individual religious agency of ordinary Muslims, as they judge and shape their own lives on the basis of various ethical repertoires, as available to them in subsequent phases of their lives. Here we arrive at the third step of my approach, which is to situate an interactive approach explicitly within the contours of practice theory.

In the course of the twentieth century, anthropologists started to question the primacy (found in the work of leading nineteenth century social theorists such as Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim) of political and economic ‘structures’ as the main determining factor in the constitution of human behaviour. Instead, they proposed to take into consideration the acts of individuals, and the (possible) agency vested in those acts. Rather than isolated structures, moral regimes may be seen as part of a comprehensive ‘system’ integrating a given society’s cultural and political configuration into a ‘seamless whole’ on the basis of particular social ordering principles (Ortner 1984). As Ortner has argued, system and practice are connected to one another in a dialectical relationship, meaning that there is never a simple or timeless ‘domination’ of the system over practice. ‘Specific realities of asymmetry, inequality, and domination in a given time and place’ can be found at the heart of the system, but they are never unchangeable (Ibid.: 149). Just like it is impossible to explain human behaviour without referring to its institutional input, it is impossible to view the system entirely outside practice. This does not mean that we cannot analyse cultural or political ‘structures’, or ‘patterns’, but rather that we view these structures as contested arenas rather than ‘blueprints’ for action.

According to Fredrik Barth (1993:173), in order to discover patterns of action, it is necessary to ‘unravel whatever connections and constraints direct the interpretations people make [of events], and thereby give shape to the lives and meanings we are trying to understand’. In this dissertation, focus will be placed on what Barth calls the ‘intermediary’ realm of self-conscious and reflective action, as located between routinised behaviour and cultural context. Perhaps more than Barth, however, I will treat this realm as a space of contestations, revealed both by the controlling forces of moral regimes and the space claimed by individual agents on the basis of particular, religious as well as ‘worldly’ aspirations. Foregrounding control and aspiration as oppositional, but deeply

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23 With regard to the context of Southeast Asia, see, e.g., Arskal Salim 2008; Bowen 2003; Euis Nurlaelawati 2010; Feener 2007, forthcoming; Liow 2009; Nur Ichwan 2006; Peletz 2002.
24 See Ortner (1984; 2005) for debates in anthropology. See Ellison 2000 for a useful (and relatively recent) review of the agency concept in the context of politics, citizenship and democracy. Interesting views have also been advanced from within the field of cognitive psychology and evolutionary biology. Consider, for example, Bandura (2001) on the importance of ‘agentic transactions’, and the difference between different ‘modes’ of agency.
related directions of human action, makes it possible to focus simultaneously on moral
discipline and emotionally determined categories of thought and practice, including the
doubts, dilemmas, insecurities, exclusions, and forms of despair that are important for the
ways in which people understand the world and lead their lives. This means that we deal
with the Muslim ‘subject’ not only in terms of increased piety, success, social mobility,
transformation, and ‘progress’, but also in terms of emotional drawbacks, including the
false promises, senses of failure and stagnation, and concomitant feelings of stress and
d disillusion. It implies that the process of ‘becoming a better Muslim’ is contingent,
multidirectional, fragmented, and personal.

In his view of orthodoxy, and his call to view religion as a ‘discursive tradition’,
Talal Asad (1986) sought to place the study of religious practice squarely in the domain of
power.25 Although I agree that it is important to investigate how religious
(self)disciplining and processes of defining orthodoxy involve particular relationships of
power, I believe that this approach also leads to an undue focus on practices of (bodily)
discipline in the constitution of the ethical self. Most of my interlocutors were explicit
about the need to ‘become a better Muslim’, but this did not mean that a particular set of
rules and dispositions, or the adherence to a disciplinary framework, formed the only, or
even primary, framework for maintaining religious belief or cultivating religious
experience. Doubt, deference, states of ‘not-knowing’, structural or temporary
‘indifference’ about particular dimensions of Islam, and – indeed – experiences of ‘failure’
were often regarded as part and parcel of the personal process of ethical improvement.
This, moreover, was seldom regarded as a straight, predictable, or even very progressive
‘route’. What is needed, then, is a more sophisticated approach to the moral dimension of
individual agency, defined as the ‘socio-culturally mediated capacity to act’ (Ahearn
2001:112) or the ‘ability to make things happen’ (Cassaniti 2012:303).

Instead of privileging the dimension of power, I follow Michael Lambek, who
argues that, although inextricably connected, power and morality refer to distinct domains
that may be analytically separated. The anthropology of ethics, Lambek (2000:312) states,
cannot simply ‘rest with power’. Instead, it must take into account the social and cultural
context in which power is produced and conceptualized. This entails taking seriously also
the main ‘alternatives to power’.

Importantly, within the conceptual domain of religion, power is always confronted
with those concerns (worldly, material, immediate, contingent) to which it is wielded. In
this sense, power is essentially ‘counterposed’ to morality. Rather than reifying
‘naturalized’ (Foucault) or ‘concealed’ (Bourdieu) forms of power, Lambek turned to the
Aristotelian concept of phronesis (moral practice or judgment) as a ‘corrective for still-
dominant characterizations of rulebound and mystified members of “traditional
societies”’. Morality, as the ‘striving for human good’, represents a ‘significant third
domain along power and desire’. A crucial passage I would like to single out, is where
Lambek reminds us that morality implies agency:

If religion is inevitably bound up with the naturalization of power and the legitimation or
sanctification of the world it construct or inherits, it also enables (and directs) meaningful
agency. Contemporary discussions remain merely cynical if they do not delineate the capacity

25 Asad’s intervention followed from a general critique on essentialistic definitions of religion (cf. Asad
1993, Ch. 1). In his view, orthodoxy, while ‘crucial’ to all Islamic traditions, is ‘not a mere body of opinion,
but a distinctive relationship – a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate,
uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect
ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy.’ (Asad 1986:15-16).
and means for virtuous action as well as the limitations placed upon it. Analysis of the knowledge/power nexus need to be supplemented with a consideration of the moral, just as discussions of morality need to be informed by a practice approach (Ibid.:309).

In order to investigate how moral agency becomes practice, and how practice in turn informs particular conceptions of ethics, we should begin by asking how these 'human concerns' are constructed in the first place, how these change over time, and on basis of what cultural models and agreements people choose to act.

Finally, I find it useful to distinguish, like Lambek does, between the concepts of 'act' and 'practice'. While acts are necessarily 'singular' and 'irreversible' instances, practice refers to an ongoing (though continuously changing) process. Acts are performative. They build on 'practical judgment' and, a such, 'percolate from or disrupt the stream of practice' (Lambek 2010a:19), while the 'ethical' resides in both (Lambek 2010b:39). My focus on individual religious agency, the way in which it expands and contracts in relation to normative constraints, needs a practice oriented approach, for 'ethics (...) is not only about executing acts, establishing criteria, and practicing judgement, but also about confronting their limits' (Ibid.).

**Fieldwork and outline**

This dissertation is based partly on archival materials, and partly on fieldwork research. Written, Dutch and Indonesian language sources were collected in the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean studies in Leiden, the National Archive in The Hague, the National Archive in Jakarta, and the Provincial Archive in Banda Aceh. Fieldwork was carried out mostly in Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia). Acehnese, like most other people in Indonesia, generally do not consider Bahasa Indonesia as their first language. However, most people speak, and virtually everyone understands, Indonesian besides Acehnese. During my research, very occasionally I met with people who could not, or did not feel comfortable, speaking Indonesian. Although I was able to learn some Acehnese, I never succeeded in speaking it fluently. I did obtain a good passive understanding, which meant that it was possible at least to understand conversations that were not directed explicitly at me. I conducted fieldwork in Aceh during two periods, namely three months from October to December 2008, and twelve months between October 2009 and September 2010. Finally there were brief visits of little over a week in July 2011 and December 2012. I regarded the first period mainly as an orientation visit, important to get a feel of the region, which I knew only from my brief visit from Malaysia in 2006. Most of the ethnographic data presented in this dissertation were collected during the second period, in 2009-2010. In this period I chose two field sites: an urban, tsunami-affected neighbourhood in Banda Aceh, and a small, rural village in Aceh Besar. I will refer to these places pseudonymically, respectively as Blang Daruet and Juroung.

During the 2008 visit I lived on the university campus in Darussalam, Banda Aceh, which is shared by the Syiah Kuala University (Unsyiah) and the State Religious Institute (IAIN) Ar-Raniry. In this period I was able to stay in the house of Professor Darwis Soelaiman, a retired professor of educational sciences at Unsyiah, and his wife Mariyana. One of my objectives during this visit was to familiarize myself with the 'world of the dayah', the Acehnese network of religious boarding schools. Although I do not focus specifically in this dissertation on the dayah setting, it is important to emphasize that these institutions are an important frame of reference for Acehnese religious life generally. Differences in the education system reflect basic doctrinal differences, comparable to the broad 'sociological' distinction often made in the context of Indonesia between 'NU' and
'Muhammadiyah' orientations. Most leaders and students of *dayah salafi* associate themselves – formally or informally – with the NU, while the leaders of *dayah moderen* may or may not associate themselves with the Muhammadiyah.

Assisted by Muhajir Al-Fairusy, who was at the time a student at the IAIN Ar-Raniry, I visited some 20 *dayah* in the Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar area during a period of one month. We would usually arrive at these places unannounced, on motorcycle, to try and meet leaders, teachers, students and villagers. We did not conduct extensive interviews during these visits. Although we asked some questions about scholarly networks, curricula, and institutional histories, most of all I was intent on getting a feel of the routines and practices central to the lives of teachers and students. Many men and women in Aceh, particularly in rural areas, have lived one or more years in a *dayah*. Therefore, I have always looked back on these visits as highly formative for myself, even if this is not clearly evident from the ethnographic descriptions presented in this dissertation.

Muhajir's willingness to be my guide was significant for several reasons. Although a student at the IAIN, he was highly interested in the *dayah* curriculum. Once or twice a week he attended lessons at the Dayah Darul Ulum, in the village of Ateuk Long Ie (about ten minutes from the university campus in Darussalam, Aceh Besar), which was founded in 1962 by the famous *ulama* Teungku Usman al-Fauzy (d. 1992). He was thus familiar with different forms of religious instruction. Even within Aceh, the world of the *dayah* is known as introverted. As a (non-Muslim) foreigner, it was important for me to be accompanied on these first, unannounced visits by someone who spoke Acehnese, and who was familiar with the (unspoken) rules and codes of behaviour of the *dayah*. Muhajir took great care explaining to me the importance of introductory rituals, appropriate gifts (like sugar, or coffee for the students), and, above all, patience. There was also another, special reason why I was lucky to have Muhajir on my side at this early stage of my research. Besides an enthusiastic and bright young student, he was a grandson of Teungku Dahlan Al-Fairusy (d. 2007), the former leader of the legendary Dayah Tanoh Abe, which is located in the sub-district of Seulimeum, Aceh Besar. During visits to the *dayah*, Muhajir usually mentioned this pedigree (which is not at all strange or obtrusive in the Acehnese context, where kin and place of descent are the most common ways of self-identification). I am quite sure that this made some of our visits easier, or at least more informal.

One day in November 2008 Muhajir and I visited a school which, in this dissertation, I will call Darul Hidayat. My first impression during this visit was one of amazement. It was a large school, accommodating hundreds of students, male and female. It seemed well taken care of, at least in terms of the quality of its buildings. The largest buildings were storied, and built of concrete. Most student rooms were more simple, built of brick or wood, with thatched roofs, but still better kept than we had seen before that at other schools. Clearly, that afternoon was reserved for communal labour (*gotong royong*), giving us the impression of a rather smooth operation. Students industriously walked around with maintenance materials in their hands, brooms and rakes, buckets full of stones and gravel taken from the riverbed, and large bundles of palm leaf. As the *dayah* leadership turned out to be absent, we were told by a caretaker about the history of the institution, the status of its grounds, and the origins of its students. One week later we

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26 Muhammadiyah was founded in Yogyakarta in 1912, and is the largest Islamic modernist organisation in Indonesia. Nahdatul Ulama ("Awakening of the Ulama") was founded in 1926, primarily in reaction to the Muhammadiyah, as the latter was regarded as a threat to many of the traditional doctrines and practices central to life in Javanese pesantren. Traditionally, Muhammadiyah and NU reflect a rough divide between 'middle class' urban and 'lower class' (J: *wong cilik*) rural lifestyles.
returned and met briefly with Abuya, the head of the dayah, who received us in a large, beautifully decorated balai in front of his house. Afterwards we strolled to the adjacent village, the administrative boundaries of which also enclosed Darul Hidayat, to pay a courtesy visit (silaturahim) to the village head (keuchik). When told about my research, the keuchik, Ilyas, invited us to join the weekly religious lesson (pengajian), which would take place, that very night, in the village communal hall (meunasah). We ended up staying for the night, talking until late with the village’s young men, and sleeping in the meunasah.

One week later I visited again, this time alone, and staying for two nights. This time a young man I call Agus (with 25 years one year younger than me) offered me to stay at his house. I accepted, not because I did not want to sleep in the meunasah, but because of the generosity of his offer, and because I hoped this would give me an opportunity to meet his family and experience some of their daily routines. This village was Juroung. In 2009-2010 Agus’ family, which included among others his father Hasyim and his mother Adhinda, would become my host family during the time of my research there.

Juroung was part of a cluster of eight villages, surrounding a market town just off the road from Banda Aceh to Medan. With 115 households, and little over 500 inhabitants, it was a community of intermediate size. The village itself did not have a mosque. There was one at the market, and one at the dayah, both of which were used by villagers for Friday prayers. Juroung lay on the Aceh River (Krueng Aceh), close to the main road. Most commercial activities took place at the market and on the side of the road. In the village, the only ‘businesses’ were a few tiny kiosks (roadside shops) and a coffee shop (kedai). The village was separated from the road by a patch of sawah land (A: blang). Another, much larger sawah was located at a twenty minutes walk, on the other side of the river, accessible via a pedestrian bridge. Besides the river and the sawah, the village bordered to the (walled) dayah compound, and to a complex of gardens (mostly coconuts, vegetables, pepper, and bananas). The inhabitants of Juroung commonly described their village as ‘poor’, arguing that most of them were farmers, and few actually owned the land on which they worked. Only ten households owned rice fields, Agus’ family being one of them. Although around 80 per cent of the population was officially registered as working in ‘farming’ (tani), very few people lived exclusively of agriculture. Most were active also in selling produce on the market, in transportation, in petty trade, odd labour, or, in the case of women, home industries. Seven people were officially registered in ‘trade’. 12 households, coming down to about ten percent, lived of civil servant salaries. The list of ‘poor people’ (fakir-miskin), drafted by the village administration a few year earlier on instructions of the kecamatan (sub-district) government counted 59 families. Overall, the people of Juroung were not very highly educated, most of them having finished only primary school or junior high school. Of the adolescents and young adults, the percentage finishing at least senior high school or vocational training was higher. In 2009 six people studied at an institution of higher education.

When I came to Aceh for a full year of field research, in October 2009, my plan was to stay for a few days with my friend Nurdin, while looking for a place to live in a Banda Aceh neighbourhood, and start my research there. I would then go back to Juroung, and decide whether it was possible or feasible to carry out my original intention, which was to conduct research both in urban Banda Aceh and rural Aceh Besar. Eventually I decided to stay in Nurdin’s kampung, Blang Daruet (he was not originally from there, and had lived there for only since a few years himself). I was able to rent a house on the compound of an elderly couple, called Yusuf and Mila. Yusuf and his family were originally from Daruet. He

27 This overview is based on the information given to me – partly orally and partly in the form of (copies of) administrative documents – by the village head and the village secretary.
had worked most of his life in the cement factory in Lhoknga, nearby Banda Aceh on the West coast. When I met them he had retired, and was active in a few businesses of his own in the transport sector. Mila worked in Banda Aceh's main hospital as a nurse. Yusuf and Mila were one of the few rich families of Daruet. They had a good name. Yusuf made a point of hiring people from Daruet for paid jobs, and invested considerable sums of money in communal projects, such as the Daruet mosque. The house in which I lived was separate from their own (much larger) house. For a while, their adult son had lived here. But he was a policeman, yet unmarried, and preferred to live in the police barracks (asrama). Yusuf and Mila took good care of me. Nonetheless, our relationship was one between tenant and landlord, and thus differed from the (more personal) relationship with my host family in Juroung. I developed rather close relationships, however, with some other neighbouring families in my street, which were mixed in terms of economic situation. Besides being my most regular interlocutors, they would ask me to join them on family visits, trips to local fairs, festivals, or to the beach.

Desa Blang Daruet is relatively close to the seashore, and stood no chance when the tsunami smashed into the city on 26 December 2004. The neighbourhood was completely destroyed. Apart from a few larger buildings, everything (mainly houses and shops, but also warehouses) was raised to the ground. In the mayhem, a staggering total of 75 per cent of about 3000 inhabitants died. In the following years Blang Daruet was physically reconstructed with the help of two international NGO's. When I came there, almost all survivors had been given a house to live in. The family of Irwan was one of the very few who built back their own house. The large majority of villagers (including my neighbours) lived in so-called rumah tsunami, concrete houses of three rooms: a sitting room, two bedrooms, a miniature bathroom, and a kitchenette (most 'tsunami-houses' in Banda Aceh look roughly like this). My own house was also a tsunami house, granted to Irwan and Mila before they built their own house back. In 2009 the neighbourhood had a total of 1325 inhabitants, including many newcomers. Like Juroung, Blang Daruet was not a wealthy community. According to the kampung secretary's own calculations, it had a poverty rate of around 50 percent. By far the largest part of the working population was registered as skilled or unskilled labourers (buruh), artisans/craftsmen (tukang), and traders (dagang). About a hundred people worked in the private sector (swasta), and 33 people were registered as civil servants (PNS). The bulk of economic activity took place on a reconstructed main road cross-cutting the neighbourhood. On one side of this road was the neighbourhood mosque, at the same time the geographical centre of the original settlement. Before the tsunami this area was very populous. In 2009 it was still more densely built than the area on the other side of the road, which, not so long ago, was mostly sawah land. My house was located in this 'new' part of the kampung.

Overall, my decision to conduct ethnographic research in Juroung and Blang Daruet worked out well. I enjoyed the close relationship with my host family in Juroung, but it was also pleasant to return regularly to my more independent lifestyle in Banda Aceh. My official residence was Daruet, where I was registered as a inhabitant. Thus, I always remained a ‘visitor’ in Juroung, regardless the length of my stay. After a while, I established a rhythm in travelling back and forth. Usually, I spent between ten days and two weeks in Juroung. The periods in Banda Aceh were somewhat longer, usually between two and three weeks, not because I needed more time for my research in Daruet, but

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28 This information was given to me by the village secretary (with permission of the village head). This and other basic information had also been compiled by the village secretary in a draft document, entitled ‘Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Gampong (RPJMG), Tahun 2009-2013 (Periodical and Subsidiary Village Development Plan, Years 2009-2013).
because other activities – interviews, university meetings, formalities – kept me there longer in the city. Contrary to Juroung, Daruet had its own office for village administration and its own mosque, both of which were good places to visit, meet people, and talk about current issues. On the other hand, Juroung was smaller, and more ‘separated’ from neighbouring communities as a result of the physical boundaries formed by rice fields, gardens, the dayah and the river. Thus, it was generally easier to find out what was ‘going on’ in Juroung than in Daruet, certainly in the beginning. More generally, one of the most important disadvantages of dividing my time was that I often ‘missed’ particular events or developments, simply because I was not there. In the case of important events I would try to get to know as much as possible afterwards from the people who were directly involved. Of course, the information I gathered in this way could never match direct observation.

The following chapters are based on different types of research material. Chapters 2 and 3 are based entirely on library sources and materials collected in the colonial archives in Leiden, The Hague and Jakarta. Chapter 4 is based partly on archival sources, and partly on the field notes of the anthropologist Chandra Jayawardena (d. 1981), who conducted extensive fieldwork in Aceh in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. The final three chapters are based almost entirely on my own fieldwork. Two considerations informed the arrangement of chapters. The first is chronology. This dissertation covers a long time period, roughly from the late sixteenth century until the early twenty-first century. It does not, however, comprise a comprehensive historical narrative. Instead, it should be read as an investigation of a specific theme, studied in the context of different time frames, chosen partly on methodological grounds and partly on the basis of the availability of historical sources. The second consideration is focus. The first chapter deals with changing modes of religious consciousness in relation to Aceh’s place in the world. Each of the following chapters then zooms in, to the colonial constitution of ‘Aceh’ as a socially and geographically defined space, to the impact of Islamic reform at district level, to the contemporary relationship between religious authority and village politics, to religious debates and routines in the context of family life, to individual projects of ethical improvement.

Chapter 2 argues that the tradition of early modern Acehnese epic poetry (hikayat) contains distinct references to the emergence of an individualised ethics. To date, the Acehnese hikayat have been read primarily as ‘indigenous’ representations of the past. In contrast, I focus on the ways in which these poems constituted visions of the future. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, a protracted decline in political and military power of the Acehnese sultanate state led to a reorganisation of the ‘interior’, which involved a structural shift from a (relatively) centralised political and economic system to a fragmented system of local princedoms based on the control over trade privileges, agriculture, kinship, and locality. This shift coincided with the emergence of the ulama as an important factor in social relations in rural areas. Contingent on these changes, the Acehnese poetic tradition suggests a general shift from a moral paradigm based on divine cosmology to a new paradigm of ethical reflection, which was mediated by the ulama, but revolved around an idea of personal responsibility to God. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Hikayat Prang Kompeuni (‘Story of the Holy War against the Dutch’), and a comparison to Java and West Sumatra. I will suggest that the changes in the content of the hikayat reflects a shift in religious orientation from ‘acting’ Muslims to ‘being’ Muslim, and from a socio-religious order based on ritual hierarchies to an order based on individual responsibility. I also posit that the intense and protracted nature of colonial violence contributed to the formation of a dominant discursive frame presenting
‘Acehnese’ ethno-religious identity in scripturalist (rather than, for example, pluralist or syncretistic) terms.

Chapter 3 deals with the late colonial period, from the late 1910s to the Japanese occupation in 1942. In Aceh, the contours of a colonial society emerged as abruptly as they disappeared. The violence of the Aceh War gradually subsided in the late 1910s, and by the 1920s Dutch colonial administrators were finally able to introduce a system of civil rule. Two decades later they were driven from Aceh by the Japanese, never to return. This chapter discusses colonial policy, ideas about indigeneity, and changes in religious practice and life-style, working, ultimately, toward a re-assessment of the relationship between Dutch colonialism and a local, geographically defined current of Islamic reformism, leading, in 1939, to the establishment of the Acehnese reformist organisation PUSA (All-Acehnese Association of Ulama). The reformist movement was far from homogeneous. However, Dutch colonial administrators were rather sympathetic to Acehnese reformers, whom they preferred over branches of organisations in West Sumatra, Java, or elsewhere, which were seen as ‘alien’ to Acehnese culture (and therefore potentially destabilizing). There were, moreover, some remarkable analogies between the ideologies of Islamic reformers and colonial administrators, including a strong propensity to declare expressions of Islamic mysticism as ‘deviant’ and dangerous, and the connection of defining true, orthodox Islam to the social and geographic construction of ‘Aceh’ as a meaningful socio-cultural space.

Chapter 4 extends this argument by investigating the impact of PUSA-style reformism on village society, in relation to the formation of the national, secular state. I focus on the district of Aceh Besar, and more specifically on the sub-district Indrapuri, which is known as one of the ‘hotspots’ of modernist reformism and militant rebellion. This chapter is based partly on archival sources, and partly on the field notes of Chandra Jayawardena, who lived in the Indrapuri area for several months in 1964, and again in the early 1970s. I will argue that Islamic scripturalism was attractive as a political currency because of its constructive, progressive and idealistic nature, but that, at the same time, its actual impact on Acehnese religious life was limited. In the early 1970s religious and political authority converged, as the state asserted itself more strongly at village level. Local representatives of the state, such as the district or sub-district heads, but also the village head and lower civil servants, sought increasing control over the infrastructure of religious authority, consisting of particular religious practices, rituals, sites and buildings. Villagers reacted to this process by using the state and expressions of religious authority to address their own particular goals. Thus, I argue that, in order to understand the interactions between the forces of moral (state and religious) authority and ordinary villagers, it is important to look at the local embeddedness of the state in Acehnese village society.

Chapter 5 further elaborates the theme of state assertion, investigating perceptions of moral leadership in the village of Juroung. My main focus is a conflict between the villagers and the leaders of the Dayah Darul Hidayat, bordering on Juroung. This conflict derived from a widespread suspicion connected to the dayah leadership’s meddling in village affairs, the close links between the dayah and the local government, and the shady processes of allocating and dividing government funds officially directed at village development. Interestingly, this conflict was commonly referred to, both by villagers and by the leaders of the dayah, as a ‘crisis of solidarity’ (masalah kekompakan). By doing so, they acknowledged that this conflict was not just economic in nature, but touched on the moral qualities of Islamic and adat leadership. In the final part of the chapter, I compare the situation in Juroung to the ways in which people in Blang Daruet
talked about, and acted upon, local leadership, in terms like respect, loyalty, and shame. In this process, I noted a conspicuous difference between older and younger generations. In approaching conflicts about local leadership, young people were inclined, much more than their elders, to view 'traditional' institutions such as the village and the dayah as inextricable parts of the state. I argue that this difference constitutes a historical shift, as young people are increasingly pragmatic consumers of religious authority, without abandoning or deeming irrelevant traditional elements in village organisation.

Chapter 6 returns to the question of Acehnese exceptionalism, as it places the study of Aceh in the debate about the global religious resurgence. I focus on the relationship between Eri, a young Acehnese man living in Blang Daruet, and both his parents. When I came to know his family, Eri was 24 years old. Feeling attracted to the ideology of the Islamic political party PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or Justice and Prosperity Party), he had adopted a strongly 'outward' pious life-style, as well as a moralistic attitude toward the behaviour of his family. I investigate how this normative influence was accommodated as part of his parents' daily life. I choose the term 'accommodation' because Eri's ideas about the observance of scriptural norms was neither rejected nor fully accepted by his family. At the same time, his parents' reactions and explanations constitutes a demonstration of the kind of religious agency central to this dissertation. I turn to the concept of moral ambiguity in order to explain the relationship between Islamic practice and a variety of personal concerns related to the sense of loss after the tsunami, changing perceptions of community, and economic concerns related to money, economic security, and class mobility. I will try to show that the ways in which these people dealt with these tensions revealed a personalised process of moral judgment.

Chapter 7 further elaborates the concept of religious agency. It focuses on the problem of sinning, in the context of what I call personal 'projects' of ethical improvement. The chapter revolves around a description of 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 in her life resulting from the tsunami; and two young men from yet another Banda Aceh neighbourhood, one of them viewing himself as a recidivistic sinner, who regarded with an ambiguous combination of respect and suspicion the 'pious turn' of the other, who was his best friend. I connect these stories to a more general ethnographic discussion about an important distinction in Acehnese Muslim society between 'knowing' and 'not-knowing' sins. Although sinfulness seems to be pre-eminently a matter of discipline, I argue that even the basic concern of dealing with bad behaviour is, at the level of lived experiences, marked by considerable measures of flexibility and creativeness. These sensibilities influence the ways in which people approach the legalistic moral frameworks formulated by the state, notably the recent implementation of Shari'a law. Rather than simply rejecting or adopting state and public discourses, I argue that Rahmat, Yani, Indra and Aris actively selected and appropriated officialised discourses of ethical improvement, as they engaged in ordinary, everyday processes of making decisions, approaching dilemmas, assessing emotions and justifying behaviour.

In the conclusion I return to the problem of Acehnese exceptionalism, and my argument about the development among ordinary Muslims in Aceh of personalised models of ethical improvement. I end with some suggestions for further refining the role that practice theory and ideas about human agency might have in the anthropology of Islam, and religion more generally.