CHAPTER 7 INNER VIRTUES, BETTER MUSLIMS: SINNING, REPENTANCE, IMPROVEMENT

‘You see, David, I never wear a headscarf in front of you, even though you are not a Muslim and not close family. Of course, this is a sin. It is said that for every single visible hair, a bundle of wood will be added to the fire in hell. And I do not even speak of all the sins which happen unnoticed.’

– Irma (Banda Aceh, 2010)

This chapter deals with the different ways in which Acehnese Muslims engage in personal processes of ethical improvement. I will approach this rather intangible topic by discussing how people in Aceh regard, and act upon, the problem of sinning. As we have seen in previous chapters, a tension exists in Aceh between the individual and communal judgement of bad behaviour. However, while much has been written in recent years about the politics of formal discipline in Aceh – both in the past and in the present – few researchers have asked how ordinary Muslims relate their own personal behaviour to the admonitions formulated and enforced by state and religious institutions. In this final chapter I approach this question by regarding sinfulness simultaneously as a ‘social vice’ and as a highly personal concern. I will argue that the generally recognised responsibility to reduce personal sinfulness offers space for interpretation and action as much as it restricts personal choices and decisions.

Although it is tempting to view the tension between individual and communal sensibilities as a typically ‘modern’ example of social and political discipline colliding with the assertiveness (and perhaps, ‘subversiveness’) of emancipated individuals, it is important to acknowledge the nuances of academic debate on this subject. Recent decades have seen increasing interest in the role of ritual practices of (self)discipline as constituting Muslim ‘selfhood’ (see, e.g., Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005). While generally speaking this chapter builds on the renewed focus on ritual in anthropology (see, e.g., Tambiah 1985) or, somewhat more specifically, on the ‘pragmatic turn’ in the anthropology of ritual (Beatty 2000:39-40), I also intend to answer explicitly to the calls of scholars such as Michael Lambek (2000:309-10), Magnus Marsden (2005:26) and Anna Gade (2004:48-49) to think beyond conceptual frameworks treating (Islamic) religion primarily as disciplinary order. Instead, I argue that it is important to acknowledge the ways in which religious motivations are applied to address, affectively and creatively, the personal spaces and dimensions of individuality that are commonly subject to contestation, doubt, and ambivalence, rather than an unequivocal focus on a progressive and idealistic project of pious perfection. 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, in turn, strongly influence the ways in which people approach the legalistic moral frameworks formulated by the state, the ulama, and the practical organisation of these forces in politics, formal institutions, and the law.

As we have seen, people in Aceh commonly frame pious expressions in terms of a personal ‘project’ that is life-long, uncertain, and multi-directional. One example of how this mentality interacts with the expectations related to communal rituals is the way in which Ramadan, the fasting month, was experienced by many of my interlocutors. During the ‘holy month’ many people engaged in the (recommended) tarawih prayers, which follow on isyah (the last of the mandatory prayers). On the first days of Ramadan nearly everyone joined in the tarawih. Numbers then steadily declined as the month progressed,
for the mosques and meunasah (village prayer halls) to fill up again on the last day. Some people commented on this by complaining that their fellow villagers (especially the younger ones) were 'lazy' (malas). A much more common reaction, however, was the explanation that the tarawih was a practice to 'get accustomed to' (membiasakan diri). Thus, many young Acehnese actively counted and remembered the total number of days they joined in and completed the ritual, in this and previous years. Their main argument was that, rather than trying to be perfect, it was important to increase the number each year, or at least to have this intention.

These observations lead to a set of interrelated questions which so far have not, or hardly, been addressed in the literature on Aceh, namely: What role do cultural models of sinning and practices of repentance play in the construction of Acehnese’ personal projects of ethical improvement? How do these ideas and practices relate to, respond to, or resist the dominant, communally defined discourse of moral and intellectual conservatism rooted in what Nur Ichwan (2011; 2007), Lindsey et al. (2007) and Aspinall (2009) have referred to as Aceh’s ‘idealised’ past, that is, a conception of the past in which supposedly ethical vigour and Islamic norms were ‘officially’ and successfully upheld? How do ordinary people negotiate the totalising discourse of state Shari’a (Feener 2012; forthcoming) in the context of their everyday lives? And finally, how do the answers to these questions relate, in turn, to the post-conflict, post-tsunami ‘moment’? This chapter formulates answers to these questions. Most of the material I draw upon comes from the interactions I had with four individuals who, at first sight, seem to have very little in common. Rahmat was an elderly man in Juroung. Yani was a young unmarried woman who lived in Blang Daruet. Aris and Indra, finally, were two young men – friends – who ran a barbershop together in a Banda Aceh neighbourhood (not Daruet). What drives the comparison is not the differences but a similarity. In recent years it has been extensively argued – as well as intensely researched – that, in this period of post-war and post-tsunami reconstruction, Acehnese society is going through a fundamental transformation. What the stories of Rahmat and Yani together demonstrate, however, is that there are also important continuities at work in the way in which Acehnese lead their daily lives, and try to be a ‘good’ person. As already suggested in the epigraph, these continuities build on a conception of ethical improvement which is informed by cultural models connected to the ‘knowledge’ of sins.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. I start with a brief discussion of public discourses of sinning and moral failure in the context of the state implementation of Shari’a law. Subsequent sections discuss the lives, thoughts and practices of Rahmat, Yani, Aris and Indra. I will use each of these cases to address a particular dimension of the way in which the problem of ‘sinfulness’ is constructed. The practices and experiences of Rachmat focus on the importance of age and regret in the increasing awareness of past sinfulness, while the section about Yani dissects the relationship between social pressure and personal responsibility. In the section about Aris and Indra I centralise one particular form of sinning – gambling – which has been drawn (among with other ‘vices’) within the domain of the current Shari’a penal code. In the final section of this chapter I connect this material to some more general observations about the distinction between knowing and not-knowing sins, drawing attention to the dialectical relationship between the ‘officialisation’ of Islam and the personal project of ethical improvement.
Sinning, Shari’a, and the pressures of the post-war, post-tsunami moment

Most Acehnese Muslims believe that uncontrolled sinfulness has destructive effects not only on the sinner him- or herself, but also on the harmony and integrity of the ‘community of believers’ (ummat). In addition to this general consideration, moralising practices and discourses are often (though not always) legitimised on the basis of the idea that Islamic piety and Acehnese ethnic and regional identity are intertwined. That said, most people agree that the consequences of sinfulness can also be mitigated by individual Muslims’ personal, long-term processes of ethical improvement, depending on the accumulation of knowledge, changes in everyday conduct and routines, and a developing sense of responsibility. Two main channels for this mitigation may be distinguished. Firstly, many Acehnese believe that God judges the behaviour of humans not only on the basis of what they do wrong, but also on what they do right. Thus, the accumulation of ‘sins’ (dosa) during one’s life has meaning only in relation to the simultaneous accumulation of ‘divine rewards’ (pahala) by performing ‘good’ deeds or practices. The second channel is the possibility for Muslims to ask for God’s mercy (ampun) through practices of repentance (bertobat) or by asking God directly for forgiveness (unta ampun). This means that Acehnese Muslims rarely see committed sins as isolated facts, but always in the context of a lifelong project.

Acehnese often talk about the ‘exam’ each person is subjected to after entering the ‘world of the grave’ (alam barzah). This is essentially a test of faith, carried out by the two angels, Munkar and Nakir, who follow each Muslim in life, and note down their good deeds and bad deeds. The exam consists of five questions, namely: Who is your God? Who is your Prophet? What is your Book? Where is your kiblat? and Who are your Brothers and Sisters? After barzah the deceased move on to the hereafter (akhirat). The explanations of what happens then vary. Many people think that, even though every single adult Muslim who dies will be punished (disiksa, ‘tortured’) on basis of his or her record, ultimately they will all go to heaven. Others think that this record decides of whether someone will go to heaven or to hell. Then there are many positions in between. Thus, I heard people explain that there is a period in the afterlife when ‘bad’ people are tortured, and ‘good’ people merely wait, until the Day of Judgment (kiamat) comes to bring the final verdict. What most people agree on, however, is that sins committed during life have serious consequences, and that this is something to worry or be concerned about.

The idea that the Acehnese are a particularly ‘pious’ people is an important factor of the post-conflict, post tsunami dynamic, and the development in this context of a local formulation of Islamic law. The notion that the Acehnese have a special responsibility not to engage in sinful behaviour has accelerated the implementation of Shari’a, especially, it seems, after the tsunami. At the same time, the notion has contributed to an apparent increase in non-state practices of moral policing and vigilantism in villages and neighbourhoods (see, e.g., Feener forthcoming; Human Rights Watch 2010; Newman 2009; Arskal Salim and Adlin Sila 2010; Siapno 2002:36-39). Yet, it is important to recognise that the current Shari’a revival is not a unilinear, or even a very coherent process. Instead, it seems to be driven by a mutual reinforcement of several processes, including the above mentioned determination of some government agents to enforce moral regulations, the tendency of some activist groups and communities disappointed with local government to take the law into their own hands (see, e.g., Feener forthcoming; Mahdi Syihab 2010), and, as we have seen in Chapter 5, the struggle for political power by changing alliances of ulama since the 1999 autonomy law.
In Indonesia, Shari'a law has been implemented nationally in two distinct domains, namely that of family law and the financial sector (Arskal Salim and Azyumardi Azra 2003:11-13). The domains pertaining to public behaviour, including, among other possible regulations, criminal law and the use of Islam as the ideological basis for governance, have not been implemented by the national government. What sets Aceh apart is that it is the only province that has been allowed, as a result of Law No. 44/1999 on the ‘Special Status of the Province of Aceh Special Region’ and Law No. 18/2001 on the ‘Special Autonomy of the Province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam’ to implement Shari’a law in exactly these two domains. This does not mean that the national context is unimportant. Since the late 1980s the state has gradually become more accommodating toward Shari’a. Some expressions of this are the formalisation of a corpus of Islamic laws in 1990 (Euis Nurlaelawati 2010), and the increasingly activist stance of the State Council of Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI; see Olle 2009). Although Aceh is the only province which has been allowed the formal and systematic implementation of a Shari’a code designated as such, it is not a stand-alone case. In the democratic era, Shari’a inspired bylaws (so-called Peraturan Daerah, or Perda) have been implemented in many other provinces and districts as well, even if these are not allowed to be called ‘Shari’a laws.2

The implementation of Shari’a was initiated in 2002-2003, when Governor Abdullah Puteh issued a series of bylaws (called qanun) regarding the creation of a system of Islamic courts (Mahkamah Syariah), the regulation of belief (aqida), worship (ibadah), and symbols (shari’, including the regulations on dress and the criminal persecution of the use of intoxicants (khamr), gambling (maysir) and illicit relations between men and women (khalwat and zina). These regulations have led to the creation of a number of government institutions tasked with the execution, socialisation and enforcement of the new laws. Besides the Shari’a courts (Mahkamah Syariat) and the already existing Ulama Council (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, MPU), the Shari’a bureaucracy includes a State Shari’a Agency (Dinas Syariat Islam) and a Shari’a police force (Wilayatul Hisbah, WH). After the 2004 tsunami and the signing in August 2005 of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the government and the GAM, the implementation of Shari’a was further strengthened, becoming an integral element of the 2006 Law on the Governing of Aceh (LoGA).3

The most visible – and probably also the most controversial – of these institutions is the Shari’a Police, or WH. Formally, the WH are not allowed to arrest people, but only to ‘reprimand’ (tegur) and offer ‘advice’ (nasehat). They are, however, authorised to carry out ‘raids’ (raziah), for example by stopping people on the road and checking the extent to which their behaviour and general appearance conforms with Shari’a regulations. These raids have occurred most frequently in urban settings and near beaches and other places known as popular hotspots for youth ‘hanging out’. During these raids WH officers (male and female) look out for women not wearing the headscarf (jilbab; compulsory under the new law), and for (unmarried) couples engaging in illicit ‘proximity’ (khalwat).4 Although

1 As noted in Chapter 1, the decision by the central government to grant Aceh province the right to implement Shari’a law has been widely regarded as a (skewed) attempt to end the conflict. For a more elaborate discussion of the political background of the 1999 autonomy law, see Aspinall 2009:146-49; Lindsey et. al. 2007; Miller and Feener 2010.
2 Buehler 2008; Bush 2008; Parsons and Mietzner 2012.
3 This is also the law which allowed local parties (such as the Partai Aceh) to compete in provincial elections.
4 Dress regulations were one of the first official ‘Shari’a related’ concerns after the granting of autonomy. In September 1999 Regional Regulation (Peraturan Daerah) No. 451.1/21249 ‘ordered all female government employees to wear Islamic dress’, a law intended to ‘socialize the concept of Syari’ah
most people in Aceh agree that enforcement is needed for Shari’a to function, the WH is commonly disliked (and by some outrightly hated). This feeling has increased since 2006, when the WH was detached from the authority of the State Shari’a Office (Dinas Syariat Islam) and merged with the Public Order police force, Satpol Pamong Praja. A common complaint is that the WH primarily target the women, the youth and the poor (for example by stopping only motorcycles and leaving alone those people who drive cars). By far the most detrimental to their reputation, however, has been a number of criminal and violent incident involving WH officers themselves. There was public outrage about a case in which three WH officials were charged and convicted for the serial rape of a young girl in police custody in Langsa in early 2010. Although the perpetrators were brought to court, many people saw this incident as definite proof of the moral deficit of the WH. Explanations vary. A common argument is that WH officers are not selected well, as they lack both general education and specific knowledge about Islam. Some of my interlocutors stated that people join the WH because of the appeal of ‘wearing a uniform’ instead of affinity with their distinct task.

As noted in Chapter 1, the Partai Aceh (PA), which dominates the provincial government and parliament, has not generally prioritized the development of Shari’a law. However, both government agencies and individual politicians (including members of the PA) have emphasized the importance of its strict enforcement, or suggested (radical) expansion, because of religious conviction, electoral opportunism, or both. A good example of this ambiguity is the controversial Qanun Jinayat, and the somewhat surreal debate surrounding its coming into existence. The Qanun Jinayat is a bylaw drafted in the late 2000s with the goal of integrating existing regulations on Islamic criminal law into a single, comprehensive code. It was passed by the outgoing provincial parliament in September 2009, only two weeks before local election completely changed its composition (significantly, these were the first elections in which local political parties, including the PA, were allowed to stand). The passing of the Qanun Jinayat sparked fierce protest. Local and international Human Rights and Women’s Rights organizations have objected against the targeting of women and gender minorities, and against the excessive punishments it includes, with the measure of ‘stoning to death’ (rajam) adulterers being the most controversial. The Governor of Aceh, Irwandi Yusuf (a former GAM spokesman), refused to sign the law, thus preventing it to come into effect. The stance of his successor, former GAM negotiator Zaini Abdullah (elected in April 2012), has been unclear so far.

Another contentious issue is that of district-level bylaws. In 2010 the Bupati of West Aceh, Ramli Mansur, signed a local law prohibiting women to wear pants. In a stream of media reports, the Bupati announced that he would authorise the WH to confiscate amongst the civilian population’ (Miller 2009:54). Miller quotes from an interview with the Rector of IAIN Ar-Raniry, Safwan Idris, who stated that ‘the regulation targeted women because in Aceh women were widely seen as the “moral custodians of religion and culture”’. Today, dress regulations do not only apply to women. Regional Bylaw (Peraturan Daerah) No. 5/2000 states that ‘every Muslim and Muslimah is obliged to dress in accordance with the rules and guidance of Islam (wajib berbusana sesuai dengan tuntunan ajaran Islam), whether in family life or when intermingling with society’. Qanun No. 11/2002 prescribes that ‘every Muslim is required to wear Islamic dress (wajib berbusana Islami)’, defining the latter as ‘clothes that cover one’s aurat (pakaihan yang menutup aurat yang tidak tembus pandang, dan tidak memperlihatkan bentuk tubuh)’. Both men and women are thus required to cover their aurat (intimate parts of the human body), and not be dressed in ‘tight-fitting’ clothes. Aurat is not clearly defined, but it is commonly stated that, for women, it includes their hair, arms and legs. For men, it includes their body between their shoulders and their knees. It seems evident, then, that the impact of the regulations on dress is more significant for women compared to men.
pants, and replace them by skirts that would be provided for by the District government. In December 2012 the government of the Lhokseumawe municipality, led by mayor Suaidi Yahya, announced a measure that would prohibit women to sit on the back of a motorcycle with their legs astride, prompting debates in both local, national and even international media.

Another contentious aspect is the perceived relationship between the process of Shari’a implementation and vigilante violence, or ‘street justice’. Officials involved in the implementation process have stated that Shari’a law should be regarded as a basis of protection against, rather than an encouragement of, vigilante violence (Feener 2012). However, according to human rights advocates the Islamic penal code has encouraged local communities to police public morality in their own villages and neighbourhoods, spy on their neighbour’s behaviour, and carry out violent punishment of alleged violators of Shari’a-based norms, including heavy-handed arrests, beatings, forced marriages, sexual harassment, and the practice of publicly ‘cleansing’ accused wrongdoers with sewage water. According to various reports, local authorities, including the police, district and provincial administrators, and magistrates, have done little to curb these human rights abuses, and in some cases even openly approved of them (see, e.g., Human Rights Watch 2010; International Crisis Group 2006).

Still, I think we should be careful not to place vigilante violence and morality policing exclusively, or even primarily, within the framework of state Shari’a. An exclusivist framework of Shari’a law offers few possibilities for understanding why people in Aceh think that violence is justified in some situations, and not in others, even if the alleged offence appears to be similar. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, a dominant focus on the legal particularities of Shari’a hides from view the ways in which local conflicts about public morality issues are connected to broader contestations about public space in the post-conflict, post-tsunami context, as well as the impact of Shari’a law on processes of negotiating individual space for action. While it is true that, since the ending of the conflict in 2005, some local activist groups have carried out raids and punishments to ‘help’ the government in its implementation of Shari’a (Feener forthcoming), the social and political mechanisms underlying the implementation of Islamic law cannot sufficiently explain the violent outbursts through which ordinary villagers try to protect their living environment against moral ‘transgressions’. Both in Juroung and in Blang Daruet, vigilante violence occasionally occurred. In most cases, state Shari’a was not a central issue. Instead, the people involved pointed out the centrality of local adat (customs), or ‘village law’ (hukum kampung). Protecting the ‘good name’ of the

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5 Peraturan Bupati No. 5/2010. The controversy around this regulation is still ongoing. Local women’s organisations have fiercely contested the regulation, and the discussion has been driven to a head by controversial (if not outrightly shocking) statements by the Bupati, such as ‘women who are not dressed in accordance with Sharia are worthy of getting raped (jayak diperkosa)’. Statement Bupati Aceh Barat Bikin Marah Aktifis, The Globe Journal, 22 September 2011 (Accessed 27 October 2012).

village, and the central role in this process of the village youth (pemuda) is typically connected to the strengthening of adat rather than the implementation of Shari’a.\(^7\)

A domain in which the connection between Shari’a law and vigilante violence does seem to be rather evident, is the criminalisation of ‘deviancy’ (commonly denoted in Aceh as deviant ‘sects’ or ‘teachings’ aliran/ajaran sesat). In April 2011 Governor Irwandi Yusuf announced a formal ban on 14 deviant sects by decree (Peraturan Gubernor, Pergub). This decision was made after the government of Aceh, with the assistance of the Council of Ulama (MPU), had investigated the practices and doctrines allegedly disseminated by a total of 17 groups.\(^8\) On 17 November 2012 a religious teacher known as Teungku Aiyub, residing in the sub-district of Plimbang, Bireuen (North Aceh), was killed by an angry mob after being accused, for almost two years, of disseminating deviant teachings.\(^9\) While incidents like these reveal a genuine concern on the side of local villagers, they should also be regarded in a more general context of media attention beating up the risk of ‘detrimental’ influences on the social and moral order at large. Apparently, many of the attackers in the case of Teungku Aiyub were not from the same village, or even the same sub-district. Almost simultaneously with the horrific events in Plimbang, on 20 November 2012 Mirza Alfath, a lecturer at the Law Faculty of the Universitas Malikussaleh, Lhokseumawe (North Aceh), was accused in the largest regional newspaper Serambi Indonesia of ‘insulting’ Islam and ‘glorifying Jews’ on his Facebook page. That same night, a mob accumulated in front of his house and started to throw rocks. Before the situation escalated further, the police arrived to close the property. Mirza Alfath was brought to the police station ‘for his own safety’. A few days later, after being ‘interrogated’ by the local branch of the MPU, he publicly apologized at the Islamic Centre Mosque in Lhokseumawe, acknowledging that his Facebook postings were ‘insulting and harmful to Islam’ and that he was prepared to repent. He also confirmed his adherence to Islam by pronouncing the confession of faith (syahadat), and consequently promised to leave the neighbourhood.\(^10\)

Michael Feener (forthcoming) and Nur Ichwan (2007; 2011), while downplaying the power of state Shari’a institutions, have both emphasized the discursive importance of Shari’a law as a totalising, systematic vision of Islam (Islam yang kaffah), its connection to the developmentalist nature of the Indonesian state project, and the social and political pressures distinctive of post-conflict, post-tsunami Aceh. In the words of Nur Ichwan, although the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh has been largely a top-down process, in the course of less than a decade the ideal of comprehensive Shari’a has become a

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\(^7\) Take, for example, a discussion I had with Saiful, a 30 year old Daruet resident, who once asked me whether I had witnessed a public caning yet. I answered I had not. ‘You should go’, he said. ‘Many people come and watch’. I asked whether a caning had ever taken place at the Daruet mosque. He answered: No, but this does not mean that there have been no violations of Shari’a (pelanggaran Syariat), there have been many!’ Most cases, he explained, were handled ‘internally’ to protect the name of Daruet. ‘Just so that the newspaper don’t start writing that the people of Daruet this, the people of Daruet that (warga Daruet begini, warga Daruet begitu). ‘When people come to Daruet from outside (dari luar), and do bad things here (hal jahat), only then we call in the WH’.

\(^8\) ‘Pemerintah Aceh Larang 14 Aliran Keagamaan’, Serambi Indonesia, 7 April 2011.

\(^9\) Ironically, it was only after the violent clash that the MPU, by word of its Vice-Chairman Teungku H. Jamaluddin, declared that the group did not represent a deviant sect. ‘Satu lagi: soal dugaan ajaran sesat!’, Modus Aceh, 31 March 2011; ‘Malam berdarah di Jambo Dalam’, Modus Aceh, Edisi 19-25 November 2012; ‘Bentrok warga Bireuen, ulama: tak terbukti ajaran sesat’, www.tempo.co, 17-11-2012 (Accessed 26-12-2012).

‘master signifier’ in Aceh, resulting from a socialisation process which includes ‘a mixture of publicity, education, indoctrination, and enforcement with a goal of enlisting public support and putting the policy into effect’ (Nur Ichwan 2007:204). Indeed, all of these factors are evident in the incidents I have mentioned in this section.

Rather than to reify the primacy of Shari’a law, I argue, we should be sensitive to the continuous interference between the process of Shari’a implementation and the status of Aceh as a ‘post-conflict’ and ‘post-disaster’ society. While individual Acehnese take into account the presence of the angels Munkar and Nakir, they have been increasingly confronted, through different media such as political speeches, newspaper articles and religious sermons, with the suggestion of a ‘collective failure’ to uphold an acceptable moral standard. Perceptions of the civil war as a perpetual source of ‘chaos’ (kacau) and ‘discord’ (fitnah), and the tsunami as a divine ‘punishment’ (hukuman), ‘warning’ (peringatan), ‘exam’ (ujian) or ‘challenge’ (percobaan), have fed this paradigm. Nonetheless, lively debate takes place within its boundaries. For example, I witnessed heated discussions, both in Juroung and in Blang Daruet, about the relationship between the conflict, the tsunami, and what should be interpreted as the will of God. Some people expressed the thought that the conflict (whether state terror, the incapacity of Acehnese leaders to manage their own country adequately, or both) caused God to intervene and bring about the tsunami to ‘cleanse’ (membersihkan) or ‘purify’ (menyucikan) Aceh. This view had appeal to some people, but angered those rejecting the implicit suggestion of the GAM being blamed for the tsunami.

Finally, and connected to the concern of sinfulness and the suggestion of collective failure, there was the awkward combination of enthusiasm and anxiety that many people felt in relation to the idea of Aceh having ‘opened up’ to the outside world (Aceh sudah terbuka), the latter including everything from aid workers and NGO’s, domestic and foreign investment, non-Acehnese religious teachers, missionaries, researchers, tourists, alleged ‘terrorists’, as well as the more intangible forces of globalisation and ‘westernisation’. This process was perceived by most people simultaneously as a blessing and a threat. Authoritative figures who, for whatever reason, had stakes in emphasising morality (politicians, government officials, preachers, religious teachers, members of the security forces) responded to both emotions. In the following three sections I will focus on the question how four individuals – Rahmat, Yani, Aris and Indra – judged and dealt with their own perceived sins in this (partly rhetorical) context of social and political transformation.

**Early life discipline, older age consciousness: the repentance of Rahmat**

Under the house, between the thick wooden poles, stood one of the relics of Rahmat’s past: an old and dusty, yellow Vespa motorcycle built in 1959. Rahmat had bought it from his boss, in the late 1960s, not long after he had moved from Pidie to Banda Aceh to work as a trader on the market. It was not until the late 1980s that he replaced it with a newer model, the one he still used in 2010 to go to the market and the gardens. Still, he would never get rid of that first one. It stood there motionless, and its battery was dead. But if necessary, Rahmat claimed, it would still start (masih hidup, ‘It still works!’). Standing in a dark dusty corner, covered with cloth, it was not a conspicuous object, and I may never have noticed it, were it not for the fact that Rahmat often mentioned it when he talked about the past. There were not many motorcycles around in Banda Aceh in the 1960s, and fewer cars. For Rahmat, who came from a poor family, to become the owner of that Vespa was a significant achievement. At the same time, it symbolised the relationship with his
boss, whom he referred to with the (Chinese) term towkay. This relationship lasted almost half a century, until the towkay’s death in the late 1990s. In this sense, the motorcycle stood there as a quiet demonstration of a life long lived.

Rahmat was born in 1944 in a village in Pidie, in a family of four children. Describing his youth as ‘very tough’ (pahit sekali), he remembered periods that, for days in a row, there was not rice but only fruits to eat. His parents were farmers, but they did not own the land on which they worked. To earn cash his father sold coarse earthen kitchenware manufactured by his mother. They collected the clay themselves, and sold the pots and plates in the vicinity, at markets and in villages. Rahmat dropped out of primary school at an early age. When he was twelve years old he was told by one of the villagers (a maternal relative) to follow him to Sigli, where the man traded in sugar and ran a distribution centre for government rations. This was the start of a long-lasting relationship, and Rahmat quickly succeeded in earning his towkay’s trust. On the first day, he was given a broom and told to keep the place clean. One week later, he assisted his boss in transporting the imported sugar from the harbour of Sigli to the warehouse. After a few years he was trusted to bring large amounts of money to Banda Aceh. In the first years, Rahmat was allowed to stay in the village (instead of sleeping in the shop with the older workers), and he was given a bicycle to ride every day to Sigli. After about ten years he was ordered by the towkay to go and work in his newly opened cloth-shop in Banda Aceh. Here Rahmat would work for more than three decades.

Rahmat met his wife Nurianti on the market in Banda Aceh. Nurianti, who was two years younger than him, came from the village of Juroung. Her family was relatively well off, at least compared to most other villagers. Her father had been involved in a short military career which had taken him to North Sumatra during the revolution. After that, he returned to Juroung and became a tailor. Nurianti was one of the few girls of the subdistrict who went to Banda Aceh to study. She wanted to become a teacher. In Banda Aceh she lived in the house of her uncle, who became a wealthy man. When her uncle decided to move to Jakarta and asked her to come along, Nurianti refused his offer. Instead, she moved into a boarding house for girls. It was in this period that she ran into Rahmat. They married in 1968, after Nurianti had finished her studies, moved back to Juroung, and found a job as a teacher in the local primary school. Rahmat moved in with her family. A few years later they built their own place next to the old family house.

By 2008 Nurianti and Rahmat had been married for 39 years and had had five children. In 2007 they performed the Haj, the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. Until that moment, neither one of them had ever travelled beyond Medan, and both experienced the journey as a pivotal moment in their lives. They loved to tell the story, in which they concentrated as much on the eccentricities of Saudi Arabian society (its wealth, its crowdedness, its thieves) as on the different rites constituting the pilgrimage. Both Nurianti and Rahmat expressed to me the feeling that the Haj signified the end of a life phase, marking the beginning of their ‘old age’. Having completed the last of the five pillars (rukun Islam), they now felt they had entered a period of reflection. The Haj, Rahmat said, ‘is like a lid on my life’ (tutup hidup ayah). It coincided, moreover, with what he called the ‘maximum age’ for Muslims, 63, the age on which the Prophet died. Every year above this age was ‘extra’ (kelebihan), which in practice meant that he should be ‘extra grateful’ (lebih bersyukur), and ‘extra diligent in worship’ (lebih rajin beribadah). In particular, it signified a period of repentance (bertobat).

To understand the emotional roots and implications of this shift, it is useful to give a brief impression of Rahmat’s daily routines as I observed them in this phase of his life. Rahmat stood up every day in the early morning, at the sound of the azan (the call to
prayer), to perform the subuh (the first of the mandatory prayers). After prayer he ate breakfast, which consisted of the leftovers of yesterday’s dinner. Not so long ago, this was the time of day at which he would leave for Banda Aceh to work. In this new life phase he used the morning hours to work in the vegetable garden. He came back for lunch, after which he rested or slept. He rarely left the village. On market days (Monday and Friday) he went to the market to buy fish. On Friday he prayed in the market mosque. Sometimes, if their youngest son felt like driving, they went on family visits. Rahmat liked to go on trips, but not alone. They had an old car, which he never drove. In the village he mostly kept to the house. He rarely visited the coffee shops or the market, except for buying his daily ration of cigarettes. After maghrib (the fourth of the daily mandatory prayers), he spent about half an hour performing dikir (devotional chanting). In the evening he liked to watch TV.

Rahmat often referred to the proximity of death, and the need to prepare for the afterlife (akhirat). The main purpose of old age, he said, was to ask for forgiveness (minta ampun) and repent (bertobat). Islamic repentance rituals take multiple forms, but the most routinely practiced is its standard inclusion in the daily prayers (salat). For Muslims worldwide, salat is bestowed with a variety of meanings, a phenomenon which, as John Bowen explained, is less the result of pluralism than of the fundamental absence within the ritual itself of a ‘single symbolic or iconic code’ (Bowen 1989:615). For most Acehnese I came to know, the essence of the salat lay in the individual’s concentration on the personal relationship with God. Thus, young Acehnese were taught that the bodily performance (the exact movements, the careful pronunciation of the Arabic), were closely connected to the attempt to clear one’s head from any thought other than that of God. This state was referred to as khusyuk. Acehnese Muslims may choose to repent as a part of any prayer by uttering a formula in which they ask God for His forgiveness, either for their own sins, or for those of others. Most people believed that the better one succeeded in establishing a state of khusyuk, the more directly the prayer, including the request for forgiveness, was heard by God.

Repentance through worship is not the only way in which Acehnese Muslims deal with their sins. Another channel is to compensate for bad behaviour by collecting divine rewards for ‘good’ behaviour (pahala). According to Rahmat’s wife, Nuriati, there are many ways to do this, including visiting the sick, people who had given birth, or places where a disaster (musibah) happened. ‘All these places we have to go to. All of this brings us pahala.’ Most prominent, however, was visiting funeral kenduri, the communal meals and prayers for the deceased. Nuriati distinguished between different functions of funeral kenduri, as she explained that the act of visiting these meals was as much a matter of accumulating divine rewards as a social obligation. When I asked her whether she visited these kenduri more often now than in the past, she answered: ‘In the past I went as well. But you need to have the time. I have more time now, since I have retired. For Muslims, it brings a lot of pahala. (…). But it is also adat. Acehnese adat. Some people don’t want to go. They are just lazy.’ Such ambiguities aside, there was no doubt that her invigorated keenness to visit funeral kenduri was connected to her advanced age, and the thought that death was approaching.

Just like his wife, Rahmat connected conceptions of ritual, knowledge and faith to concerns of life phase and death. He was not afraid of death (‘everyone dies, eventually’). I asked him: ‘So do you feel you have sufficient knowledge, you know, for the exam of the angels? (ujian melalikat).’ He answered that he did not worry about this, because the ‘knowledge of life’ (ilmu kehidupan) was surely enough. He explained: ‘We Muslims, we must pray (harus salat). We must fast (harus puasa). And we must not take what belongs
to others (jangan ambil yang punya orang).’ When a Muslim is conscious of this (sadar), he continued, the answers to the Angels’ questions will appear as a matter of course. For Rahmat, this faith explained why the ‘knowledge of life’ was more important than the ‘higher knowledge’ (ilmu tinggi) taught in the pesantren. This did not mean that he regarded this higher knowledge as useless, quite the contrary, but that, at his age, it was becoming less and less relevant for him personally.

Rahmat focused on the virtues contained in daily routines. For him the significance of salat lay partly in the fact that it was rehearsed. Prayer, he explained, ‘is like sepor’ (a term referring to an old-fashioned Dutch word for gymnastics). ‘[It is] like a morning-run, it is all about practice (latihan).’ This was the reason, he argued, that salat should be taught to children when they are young. ‘Children should start learning how to pray from their seventh. Once they are seventeen, they should make sure not to neglect it anymore.’ If the salat was taught in this way, he thought, upholding the daily routine should no longer be difficult or challenging. With praying regularly from an early age, a ‘little clock’ is developed internally (supaya ada jam di dalam). The clock makes sure that, if a prayer is skipped, a person will feel uncomfortable (merasa kurang enak). Turning to the problem of sinfulness, one could say that obligatory rituals, such as salat and the fast, are doubly charged. They have a function in dealing with sins, but at the same time it is considered sinful when they are not (or not adequately) performed. Rahmat emphasised the importance of salat not just because it was an ‘abstract’ religious obligation. The bodily discipline associated with the faithful performance of the ritual constituted for him a physical defence mechanism against the workings of the devil (A: seeten). This was also the reason that he thought it was crucial to pray as soon as the call to prayer (azan) sounded. ‘If you do not pray directly after azan, you will make the work of the devil easier (...). The devil will make you lazy (seeten yang melalaikan).’

Rahmat thought that prayer also had a disciplining effect on other ‘worldly’ activities. He was careful, however, to make sure I understood this was not as such the function of the salat. When I suggested once, rather carelessly, whether the salat could also be seen as a kind of (disciplinary) training for life as a whole (apakah salat itu juga latihan untuk kehidupan) he immediately corrected me. The salat, he said, is an isolated practice, in which only the thought of God mattered. At the same time he acknowledged and valued the effect. ‘If you are disciplined in the salat you will also be more disciplined in life (kalau disiplin sembahyang, hiduppun begitu juga).’ The key term for him was tenang, which in this context may be best translated with ‘composure’, or as an interplay between calmness of mind and self-control. In this way, upholding the practice of salat was directly connected to key challenges of life, such as making a living and preventing conflict. ‘If people pray, there will be peace [lit.: no chaos]. The same goes for one’s earnings in life (kalau ada sembahyang tidak ada kacau. Rezekipun juga).’

One day, when Rahmat had talked long about his life and his youth in Pidie, I asked him what worried him most at this stage of his life (yang buat ayah paling berpikir-pikir?). He took a long puff from his cigarette, and thought for a while. Finally he said:

What is there still to worry about? Earning money... [pauses]. If you do not go anywhere, then what money is there to find? (....) Now my children sometimes give me some money. In the past I gave it to them, now they give it to me (....) I cannot work anymore. My lungs hurt. But I cannot stand doing nothing either. If I do not go to the gardens for a while, I am reminded of this. If only once I do not go, I won’t feel good. (....) If there was still some money left, I would like to go there again, one more time, you know, to Mecca. That is a thought that makes me feel comfortable (senang).
When I asked him whether he had any regrets, and whether he would change anything about his life, if possible, he answered, without thinking: ‘The things I neglected in the past’ (yang kita melalui dulu). He continued: ‘It is only now that I think about these things (sekarang sudah teringat) (...) now I am close to death.’ When I asked him for an example, he followed with a long reflection, which came down to a fundamental regret about his own short-temperedness, and the damage he believed he had inflicted because of this. Rahmat, according to his own judgment, had been too angry, too often, and for too little reason. In fact, he believed that he would still be like that if he did not actively limit his movements. It was only now, after many months, that I started to understand why Rahmat no longer wished to sit with the other men at the pos jaga (the conflict-era ‘checkpoint’ at the entrance of the kampung), or at the coffee shop where he went daily to buy his cigarettes. ‘If I sit there, people might say things, and I might react, and people will get angry, and I will get angry. (...) This is what I am careful about now. (...) In the past I made many people angry, and what to think of my time in Banda with all the haughty people there! It was difficult to control myself.’

This regret was not only connected to a change in daily routines, it was also a main incentive for his daily repentance. Here, the emotional climax lay in Rahmat’s difficult relationship with his father, which had been characterised for Rahmat by anger, guilt and disappointment. Rahmat’s anger was rooted in his early youth, and the unfairness in the way he and some of his siblings were treated as children. Rahmat gave different examples, including the fact that, often during the celebrations marking the end of Ramadan, only his eldest brother was given a new shirt (while it is considered an important tradition in Aceh that, on this day, parents give all of their children a new set of clothes). Tensions became more serious when Rahmat got older, and his father failed to bring home enough money, either because he earned too little or because of his habit of gambling away the little he had. Later, after Rahmat left his village, escaping from his family’s poverty by following his towkay to Banda Aceh, anger was complemented by the feeling of guilt. In subsequent years he visited his family a few times per year. He gave his father a bicycle, so he could stop carrying around earthenware and sell fish in neighbouring villages instead. But the meetings were often tense, and he regularly lost his patience with his father and his incapacity to care properly for his family.

I was struck by these encounters as Rahmat described them to me. As I have noted already in the previous chapter, in rural Aceh Besar fathers and sons develop avoidance relationships, in which emotions are concealed and physical proximity is to a large extent avoided. In all father-son relationships I witnessed closely in Juroung, this seemed to be generally the case. Also, and not linked particularly to father-son relationships, openly launching reprimands or admonitions at parents is considered as very shameful behaviour in Aceh. In that sense, it is not strange that the memories returned to Rahmat with a vengeance. ‘In the past, I was often angry with my father. But I did not know I should not do this. It is only now that I think about it, and that I hear about the need to repent, in the mosque, in the sermons. It is only now that I ask forgiveness (mintai ampun).’ I asked: ‘Is it just your own wrongdoings that you repent for, or do you ask forgiveness for your father too, like you said before?’ He answered:

That is just the same (begitu juga). What he did was not right, and so I ask for mercy. But it is also my sin. In Islam, it is a very grave sin if you become angry with your parents. This is what I regret now (yang menyesal), all the more when I listen to the Imam when he talks about the need to repent. Perhaps, because I did not know, I can be forgiven. I said those things to my father, and this is a great sin indeed. I have only just become conscious (itu saya baru sadar).
Thus, Rahmat connected the way in which he dealt with his sins to a particular sense of failure, which could only be really understood by him when it was 'too late'. Although he emphasized his willingness to repent, and his relationship to God, there was a discomfort there – and uncertainty about the possibility of ‘mitigating’ particular sins – which I found specific to older people like him.

What is important to emphasize, then – and this is also the point I want to stress as I move on to the next section – is that the problem of sinfulness had not always meant the same to him throughout his life. Rahmat did talk about particular rituals (such as prayer) in terms of a basic standard for a ‘good life’. But this was only a part of the story. Prayer, in his view, was a condition for faith to take root. But inner enrichment – which was closely related to faith, but, interestingly, built on failure and discomfort as much as successful self-discipline – came only with age. Rahmat's focus on personal ‘awareness’ (kesadaran) and ‘composure’ (ketenangan) also had an impact on his attitude towards village conflicts over public morality. Just like in other villages, privacy in Juroung was curtailed by occasional acts of vigilantism carried out by young, unmarried males (usually designated as the pemuda kampung, lit. ‘village youth’). With regard to the cases I witnessed or heard about, Rahmat generally judged the pemuda – and especially its leaders – to be too ‘hot-blooded’ (darah panas). When a young couple was accused of khalwat, caught (heavily-handedly) and ritually cleansed (with water) at the meunasah, Rahmat concluded that the pemuda had gone ‘mad’ (gila).11 Of course, Rahmat thought of himself as being hot-blooded too. By constructing his judgement, it seemed he was taking into account both past and present concerns. This enrichment was connected to the gradual withdrawal from social life that is commonly associated with aging.12

In the next section I turn to the life and thoughts of Yani, a young, unmarried woman in Blang Daruet, Banda Aceh. With regard to the enforcement of norms through acts of neighbourhood vigilantism, Yani was in a more vulnerable position than Rahmat. Yet, there was a conspicuous similarity in the way Yani related existing moral frameworks to her own personal process of becoming a ‘better’ person. Although I will focus again on the problem of sinning, I will centralise a different perspective. While, in the case of Rahmat, I have been interested mostly in the question how he engaged, consciously, in developing a form of inner spirituality, in the next section I will ask how Yani linked her inner ‘struggles’ to the contentious and sometimes sensitive challenge of developing a sense of moral responsibility, in a place that was still in the midst of a process of (social as well as physical) reconstruction.

11 I witnessed this incident myself (but not from the start). A couple of days later I talked to Syihab, the ‘head’ of the pemuda, to learn about his view of the ‘arrest’. He told me that, ‘in Juroung, village law applies’ (hukum kampung berlaku). ‘It is allowed to receive guests at night, but not to meet in dark spots or in the shrubs (semak-semak). We have rules.’ Syihab had taken the initiative for the ‘arrest’, but he regarded all (male) pemudato be responsible. He mentioned two reasons in particular. Firstly, he stated that illicit behavior such as khalwat had ‘damaging’ effects on the moral integrity of the Juroung residents (merusakkan warga). It was the task of the pemuda, he explained, to protect the ‘good name’ of the village. He regarded it irresponsible to ‘just let pass’ (dibiari aja) such behaviour, because the people of Juroung would feel ashamed for their village. The second reason was that ‘state law’ (hukum negara, as opposed to adat, or ‘village’ law) was, in his view, utterly unreliable. ‘If we revert to state law, perhaps [the problem] won’t be dealt with (… ) We have seen that often enough’.

12 This has also been observed to be common in other places in Indonesia. See, e.g. Beatty 2009 on East Java.
Yani’s responsibilities

Yani was 29 years old when I first met her. She presented herself to me as an open-minded, and self-proclaimed ‘modern’ (moderen) woman. She talked easily about contentious issues, such as religious persuasion, public morality, clothing and decency, friendship between (unmarried) men and women, as well as more sensitive matters like homosexuality. She liked to know ‘what was going on’ in Jakarta – in terms of news, fashion, trends and scandals –, but if I asked her whether she felt more Indonesian or Acehnese she said: ‘Aceh, of course!’ (Acehlah!). At the same time, she was ambivalent about the supposed responsibilities connected to being an Acehnese woman. Yani lived in Blang Daruet, and her family had been hit heavily by the tsunami. Her mother and three sisters lost their lives. Of the core family, only her father and a younger brother survived. In 2006 they received two neighbouring tsunami houses. Yani lived alone in one of the them. The other was shared by her father, her brother, her father’s second wife (whom he married in 2007) and her young son from an earlier marriage.

Yani was not born in Blang Daruet but in a bordering kampung her mother’s place of birth. In 1986, when Yani was five years old, the family moved to Daruet to build a house on the land owned by Yani’s paternal grandfather. Yani’s mother was a teacher at a primary school. Her father was as a clerk at the civil court. For nine years (1992-2001) he was village head (keuchik) of Daruet. This was rather remarkable. Although the function of keuchik was highly unpopular in times of conflict, even in Banda Aceh, where the safety situation was incomparably better than in rural areas, it was still unusual to elect a ‘newcomer’ (pendatang) as village head. He was forced to resign, however, after being accused by fellow villagers of corruption. After finishing high school, Yani attended a vocational collage and completed a diploma in education. Although her family had the means to pay for university fees, she had no ambition to pursue a degree. She was briefly apprenticed in a kindergarten, but in 2009 she worked four mornings per week at the administrative office of Daruet (the Kantor Kapala Desa), doing mostly clerical work. She did not have a government contract, working instead on terms of a poorly paid apprenticeship (honor; something many young people accept in the hope of being promoted eventually to the position of salaried civil servant).

Yani was not married, even though most women marry earlier, in their late teens or early twenties. She still expected to get married one day, but apparently felt that there was no need to hurry. She adored children, and could not imagine never having them herself. At the same time, she had clear ideas about her demands and desires regarding marriage. She desired a man with a good character (sifat baik), who was polite in his speech, and who would treat her right and not beat her. He should not be lazy and earn enough money (ekonominya cukup bagus). Finally, she wished for someone who was comfortable around her (senang dengan saya). She valued her independence, and expected to keep earning her own income after marriage. But she also said she would not be rigid. If her future husband would demand that she stayed at home to care for the house and the children, she would try to seek a solution. She might demand a fixed allowance, or she may try to reach a compromise through discussion and exchanging favours and demands. Finally, she argued that there was always the powerful device of influencing a husband through ‘talking shrewdly’ (istri bisa ngomong pintar).

During the course of my fieldwork I was increasingly impressed by Yani’s self-confidence with regard to marriage, economic (in)dependence, and the future more generally. There was, however, a distinct material dimension to this self-confidence. Yani had inherited land from her mother. I had never cared to ask how much. Although
according to my notes she had told me about this in one of our first conversations, I forgot about it later and she never mentioned it again. The plot of land was located in her mother's kampung, and had been idle since the tsunami. However, in the last month of my fieldwork Yani suddenly suggested that she thought about stopping work in the kampung office, buying a shop house on the main road and a car, and opening a small business selling cosmetics and beauty products. She caught me by surprise, for I knew her as someone who was perpetually short of cash. When I asked where she thought to get the money, she told me she would sell her mother's land. Thus it turned out that, although well disguised by her modest lifestyle, Yani and her brother had at their disposal a gigantic capital worth up to two billion rupiah (EUR 160,000). Although the possession of this plot seemed to warrant financial independence, it would be a mistake to reduce Yani's self-confidence to the single factor of economic power. As we will see, self-conscious engagement in ritual, and the connected creative dimension of social positioning in a world of continuously changing judgements and demands, were equal building blocks of a moral order she designed for herself, and which she used to legitimise her behaviour and future aspirations.

Yani was serious about her ritual obligations, but cared little about outward appearances and even less about people telling her what to do. Take, for example, what she told me about a marriage proposal she once got. A male acquaintance told Yani he was interested in marrying her. Yani did not agree immediately, but dated him for a while so they could get to know one another (kepacaran). Other people told her that the young man’s parents were ‘very religious’ (kuat dengan agama). Her boyfriend confirmed this, and warned that, when she met his parents, she should dress differently than from usual. Yani was not very conservative in the way she dressed. Since the implementation of Shari’a law, or more precisely since the activities of the WH, she always wore a headscarf when going out, but she refused to adjust her habit of wearing tight pants or leggings, as well as high-heeled shoes. In the end, she never got to meet his parents. It started with their refusal to either approve or disapprove of her boyfriend’s plans, something which, according to Yani, was the result of people ‘talking badly’ about her. But in fact, Yani saw a bigger problem in the attitude of her boyfriend. The only thing he did to try and improve the situation was to tell her that, in the end, it would probably be alright, and that it just needed time. From this Yani concluded that he chose to remain quiet rather than confront his parents and discuss the terms of the marriage. She was frustrated about his spinelessness (kurang brani dia) and apparent unwillingness to defend her, and ended the relationship. The episode was typical, Yani judged. ‘It is always like this. People want to tell me what to do, neighbours, distant friends, family members commenting on my clothes, my headscarf, this happens almost every day.’ This annoyed her, especially when it came from people who were not so particular about ‘religious rules’ (aturan agama) themselves. She called them ‘hypocrites’ (munafik).

Yani was ambivalent, however, about the need to defend public morality. She felt very few ties with the local pemuda, emphasising instead the role of village elders in protecting kampung morality (hak orang tua kampung untuk membela moral). At the

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13 Yani and her brother owned two plots of land. The largest, measuring around one acre, was located right next to a commercial area close to the harbour. Various people had offered to buy this land for Rp 100.000 per square metre, which would come down to a total of Rp. 1,000,000,000. However, they had also been advised to wait selling this land until there was more clarity about the question whether or not Banda Aceh would be granted free port status. In that case, the harbour would be greatly expanded, and the government might buy the land for double the price. The other plot was potentially worth even more costly, up to Rp 300.000 per square metre, but also ten times as small (1,000 square metre).
same time, she regarded religion as a ‘private matter’ (*usaha pribadi*), claiming that there was a certain domain of privacy she would defend. An older man in her street occasionally reprimanded her and her friends about their clothing. His mantra, Yani said, was that ‘the children of Mecca’s porch’ (*anak serambi Mekkah*) should ‘behave themselves’ (*membawakan diri*) and ‘cover their bodies’ (*tutup aurat*). For a long time she listened politely, until one day she lost her patience and told him that she ‘had her own values, which were her business’ (*nilai punya sendiri, urusan saya saja*). The man became angry and never talked to her again.

Male company was a riskier affair. Yani had male and female friends, with whom she sometimes visited popular coffee shops, made trips (for example to the beach), or watched movies. Yani sometimes had groups of friends staying over during the night, and on rare occasions this included men. Also, whenever her younger brother Diki had friends visiting, Yani allowed them to watch TV in her house. Just as in Juroung, there were occasional cases of neighbourhood vigilantism against *khalwat* (illicit company) or *zina* (adultery) and occasionally these turned violent, particularly if the people involved were ‘outsiders’ who had come to Daruet recently or stayed here only temporarily. The frequency of such cases had increased in preceding years, particularly after the tsunami. But while accused wrongdoers were designated as ‘violators of Shari’a’ (*pelanggar syariat*), the formal implementation of Shari’a law seldom served as the explanatory framework for this. Instead, people pointed at the changed atmosphere after the tsunami, the many newcomers, the attraction of the kampung for people looking for a temporary place to stay, or more specifically, for ‘evildoers’ (*orang jahat*). Yani, who worked at the *keuchik*’s office, often knew the ins and outs of these cases, but cared little about this. It was people’s ‘own business’. At the same time, she regarded those who were caught as ‘not so smart’ (*kurang pintar*). ‘*Adat* is strong here, and people should know that’ (*adat kuat di sini sebenarnya orang tahu*). She did not believe she could ever end up in such a situation herself.

Although in Yani’s view the implementation of Shari’a constituted a significant change in Aceh, it would be a mistake to reduce questions of (outward and inward) piety to the domain of state discipline and the law. For most Acehnese, discussions about sinning and virtuousness in the private sphere, including debates about covering aurat, appeared to be more important. Take, for example, a discussion I witnessed one day when I accompanied Yani and her friend Tia to have dinner with the family of Yani’s niece, Neli. Like Yani, Neli had lost her mother (though not as a result of the tsunami; this happened earlier). Neli now lived alone with her father and her younger sister. The discussion was about the question whether Tia should wear a headscarf in Neli’s house (that is, in front of Neli’s father). Tia asked Yani for advice, saying that she was the oldest and should know best. Yani suggested that it might be best if she did wear the jilbab, arguing that she was not *muhrim* (a closely related family member). I learnt later that evening that Neli’s father,

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14 As we have seen in the previous chapters, both in Juroung and in Blang Daruet an important social distinction was made between ‘original inhabitants’ (*orang asli*) and ‘newcomers’ (*pendatang*). With regard to moral transgressions (including *khalwat* and *zina*, but also, for example, alcohol use or more mundane criminal offences such as stealing), the stance of local villagers tended to be more harsh toward ‘newcomers’ than toward original inhabitants. It was often explained to me that, if ‘original villagers’ were caught in immoral behaviour, the village leadership would try to solve the case in a relatively soft and inconspicuous manner. However, when outsiders misbehaved, this was framed as a disturbance to the moral integrity of the village, soliciting a tough response. The explanation was often the same: if newcomers were not dealt with adequately, this may create rumours about the village being ‘free’ (*bebas*) and unconcerned about sinful behaviour, thus putting at risk the good name of the village. By the village *pemuda*, this could be seen as a proper justification for the use of violence.
although widely regarded in his neighbourhood (not Daruet) as ‘knowledgeable in religion’ (alim), could not care less whether his daughter’s friends chose to wear a headscarf in his house or not. Also, Yani herself was not muhrim either (she was related by kin to Neli’s mother, not to her father) and she had never worn a headscarf in their house. When I asked Yani a couple of days later to explain the stakes involved in the discussion (or, more precisely, whom it concerned), she answered simply that ‘this was a question for Tia, not a general matter’ (masalah Tia, bukan hal umum). Tia was an adult, she said, and thus expected to make her own substantiated assessment. The question was whether Tia thought she would be committing a sin if she did not wear a headscarf, and, if yes, how bad this was. I asked whether Yani ever posed this question to herself (she never wore a headscarf in front of me when I was in her house). She nodded, and simply said that she was ‘not perfect yet’ (Yani belum sempurna).

Most young Acehnese I knew pondered and discussed problems of moral decision making and sinfulness, and not only those affected by state Shari’a implementation. On Hari Raya Idulfitri, one year before I came to Daruet, Yani’s father had gone to Medan to visit the family of his (‘new’) wife. This made Yani sad, because she was confronted more than ever with the loss of her mother and sisters. Normally, in such a situation she would have visited the mosque, where at least there would be many people and a festive atmosphere. However, the problem was that she was having her menstrual period, which according to Islamic law made it haram (forbidden) to pray. Also, it is generally thought that, during their period, women should not even enter a mosque for menstruation (haid) is regarded as compromising (menajiskan) the purity (kesucian) of the mosque’s sacred space. Caught in a dilemma, she called her father to ask his advice. He said that she could still go, if only she would remain seated at the back of the mosque during prayer and the sermon. His argument was that she was still allowed to ‘socialise’ (bergaul) even when it was prohibited (haram) to pray. But in the end, she did not go. She gave more weight to the arguments of the ‘religious teachers’ (teungku-teungku), who would probably say that to enter the mosque would be a sin. Also, she was afraid of people asking why she did not pray. When I asked her which one of these two reasons was decisive, if any, she answered that it was the first, not to sin. ‘Actually, I was not sure who was right, my father or the teungku-teungku. So I decided to make the safest choice (keputusan paling aman).’

If sinning was a serious (though contentious) concern, so was the need to repent. During Ramadan she enthusiastically joined the daily tarawih prayer, because this was a month ‘full of forgiveness’ (bulan penuh ampunan), and ‘many rewards’ (bulan banyak pahala). It was important for her to value this opportunity granted to her by God (kasih ampun penting dimanfaati), especially, she exclaimed, ‘because I have so many sins’ (karena banyak dosa). When I asked her what sins she repented, she mentioned elements from the standard repertoire (gossiping, not wearing a headscarf), but she also explained that ‘designating’ sins was rather pointless. ‘We commit sins all the time’, she argued, ‘and most of the time we are not even aware of it (banyak dosa kita tidak tahu).’ The main answer to this problem lay in prayer. The salat, she said, ‘is like the pole of a house (salat seperti tiang rumah). If you take it away, the house will collapse.’ For the same reason, Yani thought it was important to ask forgiveness for her mother and sisters, both of whom ‘needed her prayers’ (dia membutuhkan kita berdoa).

This brings me back, as a conclusion to this section, to the tsunami. Like most others, Yani regularly thought about its meaning. Nobody could know for sure, she said, because it was impossible to know God’s ways. She did, however, believe that the tsunami constituted a form of divine wisdom (hikmah) (cf. Samuels 2012b). So she wondered what the event should mean for her. In one way, the tsunami changed everything. It meant the
death of her mother, her sisters, and the end of her family as she knew it. Yani had been particularly close to her mother, so her death was a crucial loss. At the same time, the relationship with her father changed. He became more strict after the tsunami, and increasingly demanded the right to know where she went and with whom. Yani gradually distanced herself from him. ‘There is not much I can tell my father’, she said. ‘He gets angry easily now’ (cepat emosi beliau). She got along adequately with her father’s new wife, but did not trust her with worries and secrets. Her father still supported her financially, but she increasingly felt the need to become ‘responsible and self-supportive’ (bertanggungjawab dan mandiri). But she also asked, rhetorically, ‘What kind of life is this? There is no more happiness (sudah hilang kebahagiaan). Life has become just ordinary (biasa aja), not very happy, not very terrible (tidak senang tidak buruk). In the family, I have no more friends (tidak ada lagi kawan).’ But who knows, she said, ‘it may be hikmah that I finally grow up (supaya jadi dewasa), and become independent (mandiri). After all, people say that the tsunami is a trial (percobaan).’

These ponderings, besides the result of intense sadness, clearly contributed to a personal process of ethical formation. But if this was what the tsunami did, so did events that happened before it and after it. No one in Daruet who had experienced the tsunami up close considered life to be the same afterwards. But in their reactions to the transformation marking the post-tsunami moment, most people built on past certainties as much as on present doubts. In the next section I discuss the lives of two friends, Aris and Indra. In contrast to the previous sections, I will be less interested in viewing the problem of ‘sinning’ in a broad sense, and ask what a concrete form of sinning – the practice of gambling – may tell us about the navigation of the law, public morality, and the importance of ideas about failure and success.

**Aris, Indra, and the moral dynamics of failure and success**

In December 2008 I visited the grave of Syiah Kuala, which is located on the coast, just north of Banda Aceh. There I met Aris, 28 years old. He told me that he ran a small barber shop (pangkas) together with his friend, Indra. Coincidentally, I was in need of a haircut, so later in the afternoon I stopped by their pangkas, in a Banda Aceh neighbourhood some fifteen minutes by motorcycle from my house in Blang Daruet. The ‘shop’ was actually more of a makeshift shed, built of scrap wood, comprising a large mirror, two barber chairs, and a small bench in front where people could sit and wait their turn. While Aris was cutting my hair, I asked him about his visit to the grave. Together with some friends, he would go there occasionally, and join his teacher in a zikr (chanting) session in a balai (shelter) raised on the spot. This morning his teacher had not turned up, which was the reason why he was hanging around and able to talk to me. I suggested that he must be serious about religion (serius beragama). In response, he referred to the religious songs (qasidah) playing on the background. ‘Do you hear that? I used to be fan of other kinds of music. Rock, pop, jazz. And I used to play the guitar. But now I like this music better. ‘And what about you?’, I asked Indra, looking at him through the mirror, as he was helping another customer sitting next to me. Me?’, Indra said, ‘Not yet. I am more like a Muslim KTP’ (‘Muslim’ according to his identity card). They both laughed. Aris said: ‘Yes, Indra is still a bad boy’ (masih anak nakal). His life is full of sin (hidup berdosa dia).

Aris and Indra grew up as friends in the same neighbourhood. In the past, Aris said, he was ‘just like Indra’. This changed in the years after the tsunami. Although he downplayed the relationship between the disaster and his personal ‘transformation’ (perubahan), there seemed to be little doubt that the tsunami had an important impact on
him, and the way in which he viewed his life. Many of his family lost their lives. His parents and siblings all survived, however, and he was thankful to God for this. His way of expressing gratitude was by starting to ‘seek knowledge’ (mencari ilmu), and by trying to get ‘closer’ to God (mendekati Tuhan). Then, one day, he suddenly had the feeling that God had ‘entered him’ (Tuhan masuk Aris). Not much later, he burned his guitar on the street (‘right in front of the door, my neighbours thought that I had become crazy!’). He joined a group of religious students, which came together a couple of times each week at the house of a teacher who lived in an adjacent neighbourhood. Under this guru – a former student of the famous ulama Usman al-Fauzy from Ateuk Lung le – the group studied classical subjects such as law and jurisprudence. In comparison to the common dayah curriculum, however, they seemed to concentrate more on mystical practices, as they joined their teacher in long sessions of zikr (chanting), and reciting his silsilah.

During my long fieldwork period in 2009-2010, the pangkas became my fixed spot for a haircut or a shave. In this period I came to know Aris as a pious and serious person, who never missed a prayer, talked often about religion, and occasionally took some days off to visit the graves of famous ulama in places as far as South Aceh or Singkil. He had a girlfriend, whom he did not see often because she lived in a dayah outside Banda Aceh. Apart from his work and studies, he seemed to spend most of his free time watching football in the coffee shop close to his home. Indra, whether this was justified or not, I came to see as a somewhat more complicated figure. He was friendly, attentive, and charming, and seemed to wear his heart on his sleeve. Occasionally, however, he showed signs of a darker side, evident for example in the way he talked about his girlfriend, who worked in a hospital in Langsa (East Aceh), and who came to Banda Aceh every other month or so. Without going into details, let me just mention a particular tendency toward emotional blackmail, often related to sexuality, which sometimes intrigued me, and more often made me feel plainly uncomfortable.

Indra was two years younger than Aris. He was born on the island of Simeulue, which is a rather distant place located some 150 kilometres off the coast of West Aceh. After a few years staying there, living off the clove gardens worked for generations by his mother’s family, his parents moved to Banda Aceh with their children. Indra cared little about his place of birth. He had gone back there only once, in his early twenties. He understood the language, but could not really speak it. He thought of the place as far, primitive, and boring. In the early 2000s, his parents separated, and his father left the house. By the time I got to know him, Indra lived together with his mother and older sister Ika, who had two small children of her own, and whose husband lived in Jakarta. Indra left school when he was seventeen years old, and opted to become a barber. Together, he and Aris began working in a large barbershop in Peunayoung, the central Banda Aceh district, where most shops and businesses are located. In early 2008 they decided to open a shop of their own, which they rented from a well-to-do family, on whose premises it was built.

Both Indra and Aris valued their work for what it was. Indra emphasized that he did not finish his school, and that there was little ‘high-status’ work to hope for (and which he defined in terms of larger businesses and government work). He said: The work is okay. It is honest (jujur). However, he also thought it was ‘not very good for materialistic people (orang materialis)’, a group in which he included himself. ‘Actually it is better for Aris. He is not materialistic’. Aris did, indeed, talk about his work in such pious terms, at least when I asked him about it first. He told me: ‘I like my work because it is clean (bersih) and sincere (ikhlas). (...) It is important to be modest (sederhana). This is also why I drive a [Honda] Mio. I used to have a much greater motorcycle (lebih hebat, i.e. larger, more expensive), but I sold it. This [lifestyle] suits me (cokok).’
While Indra and Aris remained good friends throughout, Aris’ ‘transformation’ did have a particular impact. His ostentatious piety was regarded by Indra with a mixture of admiration and irritation. Each time at the call for prayer (azan), sounding loudly through the neighbourhood, the pangkas was closed, and Aris walked to the nearby mosque. Indra usually stayed behind, smoking a couple of cigarettes inside, with the door closed. Aris often put pressure on him to go as well, which now and then he did. Indra said he understood why Aris did this, even though it made him feel like a bad person. He thought Aris’ intentions were good, and that he was trying to help him become a ‘better’ person. What he found more problematic than the stress on worship, was that it had become more difficult to talk to Aris about personal things. One pressing matter was his girlfriend. As my fieldwork progressed, this relationship became increasingly complicated, but Indra did not often tell Aris about this. He suspected that his concerns may not be taken seriously. ‘Aris will laugh, and then he will say I should look for another girl. He will say I need to get more serious. And he will tell me to go to the mosque (suruh ke mesjid). That’s it.’ I asked: ‘Is Aris too serious with religion?’ (apakah Aris terlalu serius beragama) He answered: ‘In general, perhaps no. But in this respect, yes!’

At the same time, Indra’s lifestyle was also causing trouble. Although sharing the pangkas, Indra and Aris essentially worked for themselves. They had their own clients, while new customers were equally divided. So if either one of them decided to come in late, or to take a few days off, this mattered little for the other. The main shared responsibility was the rent. When they first rented the shop, they negotiated a two year contract. Because Indra had no money at the time, Aris paid for it, with Indra promising that the next time it would be his turn. In April 2010, their two-year contract expired and after some tough negotiations they agreed on an extension of one year, against a 50 per cent increase in the price. It turned out, however, that Indra had not succeeded in saving enough money. He was able to borrow a part of the rent from his sister. The main share, however, was again paid by Aris, putting Indra in serious debt with him. Unsurprisingly, this put a strain on their relationship.

Indra’s financial situation was not particularly complicated. Together with his sister (who worked at a travel agency), he was responsible for supporting his mother (Ika’s father regularly sent money for his children). For himself, he needed money to pay for coffee, petrol, and cigarettes. The rest of his earnings was lost on delights categorised as ‘play’ (main-main). This included some drugs (mostly marijuana, and on a rare occasion cocaine). For the largest part, it concerned gambling.

Gambling in Aceh takes many different forms. An old, but still current practice is to stake money in domino games (main batu), or (somewhat less common) cock fights. Another popular practice is to place bets – at coffee shops – on the results of football matches. The most widespread form of gambling, however, is to enter lotteries by making use of a mobile phone. People can buy a number by sending a text message (payment is done through a bank account). Once the numbers are drawn, a message is received with the result. At times, mystical forces were attached to these numbers. Thus, I was asked more than once by one of my male interlocutors whether, by any chance, I had been dreaming about numbers the night before. Anyone dreaming a particular number would be considered a good sign, worth going for at the next try. Indra believed that ‘codes’ could be passed over in dreams. According to Aris, this was the work of the devil, who tried to persuade people to commit sins. When I asked Indra’s thoughts about this, he said; ‘Maybe it is the devil. Maybe it is God’.

Like most others, Indra bet small amounts (10.000 or 20.000 rupiah at the time; less than EUR 2,-). The problem was that he did so frequently. Indra estimated that, in
total, he may have lost some ten million rupiah in this way, while winning around three million. Besides losing money, there was the risk of being caught. Indonesia has strict laws against gambling, and since 2003 the practice is also punishable under Shari'a law. Thus, whenever Indra and other interlocutors used their mobile phones to gamble, they had both ordinary police, and the possible disgrace of being publicly caned to worry about. ‘But if the police catch you’, Indra explained, they will extort you, rather than forward your case to court. (...) At checkpoints, the police will look in your mobile phone, so you always need to make sure that you erase all the messages. In my case, it would probably cost me around two million to get rid of them.’

His cheerful and attentive appearance notwithstanding, Indra was not a particularly happy young man. He was insecure about his social status, and about his ability to keep from losing himself for long nights in a row smoking marijuana, watching TV, and gambling away his money. He often said that his life was ‘boring’ (boring). Whenever I asked him about his future aspirations, he would start joking that he might follow me to Europe, and make lots of money as a hairdresser (and then make my hair look like that of a famous European football player). The more serious answer was less spectacular, and conformed to what may well be termed the standard ideal for Acehnese men: the combination of a family and a private business (usaha). To realise this he needed, most of all, money (modal; starting capital). ‘Forty million to get married, and about the same amount to build my own pangkas in front of the house’. Since Indra was making debts instead of saving money, however, this ideal was receding rather than approaching. What was lacking, in his own analysis, was a kind of discipline similar to that of Aris:

I’ve gone wrong (aku bersalah). If I had been more disciplined (lebih disiplin), worked harder, saved more money, I could have paid Aris back, or we could have built a shop of our own, or for myself (...) The problem is just that I feel bored. I throw away my time (buang waktu, mangganggur-anggur). I don’t have another goal in life, like Aris. Aris thinks about the next world. I think about this world (pikiran Aris hari terakhir, pikiran Indra dunia ini).

Indra fantasized that, in the future, he might make the same decision as Aris. ‘You know, I think what Aris is doing is really the right thing (...). To engage in religious study (mendalami agama), to seek a regulated life (mencari hidup beraturan)’. Aris also worried about Indra. ‘He is not very good at management’, he said (using the English term). I asked: so what do you worry about most, his Afterlife, or his future in this life? ‘Both’, Aris replied. I asked him for an example. He said that his greatest worry was not Indra’s reluctance to pray, or his habit of smoking marijuana and skipping work, but rather his inveterate habit of gambling. He had been observed by intelligence agents (intel) for a long time, and was clearly in deep trouble. ‘This can happen also to Indra’, Aris stated. ‘So he should be very careful. And then I do not even speak about the money he throws away’.

Indra was not the only one taking financial risks, however. In early 2010 something unexpected happened. For some weeks Aris had asked me to join his ‘network’ (jaringan), connected to a new ‘business’ called ‘Questnet’. He explained to me that this was a highly profitable business which people may join by buying a particular product,
and subsequently become a personal link in the – theoretically ever expanding – chain of buying-and-selling. He remained rather vague about his own involvement, however, and I did not give it much attention. In April he asked me to come with him to a ‘meeting’. Sceptical and curious, I joined him. The event consisted of a slick show, including a PowerPoint presentation and a few fancy animation videos, presented by the ‘boss’ of the Aceh branch of Questnet (and taking place, interestingly, in the building of the Government Health Service). A few hours later, when we walked out of the building again, Aris was delighted, and I was flabbergasted. I found it difficult to believe that the pious and responsible Aris I thought I knew could be so enthusiastic about what surely must be the most impudent pyramid swindle I had ever seen.

Directly after the meeting, we sat down at a coffee shop to have lunch. Aris was cheerful, and I asked him incredulously: ‘Do you really believe that you can make a lot of money, easy and for free, without doing any work?’ He replied: ‘Absolutely!’ ‘And do you think about joining them?’ (I had just learned this cost at least 700.000 rupiah). He said: ‘I already have, last year!’ It turned out that, not only had he already become involved, but his way of paying for it was to exchange his old motorcycle for the ‘modest’ Honda Mio. According to Aris, this was an investment which would make him very rich. ‘If I get a lot of money, I can buy my own pangkas, and even have people working for me. Or perhaps I won’t have to be a barber at all, and follow my guru to Brunei and Surabaya to study. Then, when I come back I’ll get married, build a dayah, and become a teacher myself.’ I went home that day feeling confused. I did not even care that much that he had distorted the story about the Mio. What did concern me, was the thought of having been seduced by the attractively dramatic, but apparently at the same time hopelessly simplistic (and mistaken) image of a friendship between a responsible devout and a negligent libertine.

Aris and Indra were good friends. They were also opposing characters, with Aris being the more composed, and Indra the more outgoing. Apart from working together, they led different lives, driven by different opinions, choices, and circumstances. At the same time, their future aspirations were not so far apart. Both of them hoped, one day, to have a family, and a business of their own. In this connection, they both fantasized about sudden wealth, and to make this dream come true both of them were willing to take a gamble. The difference, in this respect, lay in the way in which these enterprises were ethically framed. The lotteries in which Indra participated were categorised as perjudian – ‘gambling’ – an activity considered haram according to the rules of Islam, and therefore seen, ultimately, as an expression of weakness. In contrast to this, Aris’ involvement in Questnet, despite being a form of financial risk taking as well (one that was, quite possibly, ‘harmful to others’, as the qunun on gambling states), was seen both by Aris and by Indra as the consequence of a disciplined life, one that comprised a ‘plan’. Thus, the ‘business’ of Questnet was placed in a category of life ‘management’, which also included acts of worship (such as prayer, or the maximisation of knowledge through study. Together, these activities meant to invest in a vision of the future that combined piety, marriage and family, and financial success. This was true even despite the fact that Indra suspected (with me) that Questnet might be nothing else than a fraud (tipu). Instead, Aris’ involvement strengthened the image of him taking his life in his own hands, and managing his future by seeking a new and profitable ‘business’. It made Indra feel slacker than ever, convinced of the need to improve his moral self, but unvaryingly uncertain of how to achieve this task.

In terms of adherence to the ‘standard’ practices of outward Islamic piety (praying, fasting, studying, dressing), Indra seemed to be one of the least ‘religious’ among my interlocutors. At the same time, however, his understanding of personal ‘improvement – in
terms of moral education, future aspirations, and the general transformation needed to become a 'successful' person, were thick with religious valences. With respect to the stress placed on life phase (arguing, for example, that he was 'not ready yet'), an important similarity may be noted with Rachmat and Yani. At the same time, the story of Aris and Indra offers a reminder that the idea of 'ethical improvement' may well be personal and processual, but not, for that reason, especially systematic or coherent. Pursuing success, and dealing with failure, implied constant oscillation between different, constantly evolving conceptualisations of individual morality.

Religious agency and state Islam: competing models of ethical improvement?

According to powerful Acehnese administrators, such as the first Head of the State Shari'a Agency Al Yasa Abubakar, state Islam is a tool for 'perfecting' the religious consciousness, and thereby the moral selves, of Acehnese individuals. As Michael Feener formulates it:

The goal is to use the new Islamic legal system to bring about sweeping social change in both the regulation of society and the character of individual Muslims to conform to a particular set of modern ideals. Al Yasa himself lists first among his expressed goals of Shari'a implementation in Aceh that of improving and perfecting the Islam of individual Muslims, arguing that if this is accomplished, the Acehnese as a whole will become more 'honest, frugal, studious, diligent, loyal, intelligent, and emotionally mature'.

Such totalising views of Islam have been strengthened by the 'total reconstruction' discourses engulfing politics after the tsunami (cf. Samuels 2012b). As I have tried to make clear in the previous three sections, ordinary Acehnese Muslims in Aceh are equally concerned with (individual) ethical improvement. Still, it appears that a particular disjunction exists between the standardising logic of 'high-modern' state Islam and the complexes of beliefs and practices that guide ordinary Acehnese in their attempts to become 'better people'. In order to understand the nature of this disjunction, it is necessary to integrate into the analysis a distinction, emphasised by many of my interlocutors, between 'knowing' and 'not-knowing' sins. As I will try to demonstrate, this (culturally constructed and personally interpreted) distinction feeds directly into the mechanisms through which people understand, and react to, the moralising discourses connected to the post-conflict, post-tsunami sense of renewal. In the final paragraph of this final section I will return to Rahmat, Yani, Aris and Indra, and discuss how this distinction between knowing and not knowing sins influenced their view on the specific issue of state Islam and Shari'a implementation.

In her study of Quranic practices in Indonesia in the 1990s, Anna Gade emphasised the role of affect in ordinary Muslims' personal pieties. In processes of ritual learning, she argued, emotions have the capacity to generate 'continued or escalated practice' (Gade 2004:49), thus driving forward (subjective) processes of ethical improvement. Gade attached equal value to ritual practice as to power and ideology as 'organising principles' of religious change. The 'moods and motivations' associated with the revival of particular rituals can be seen as both cause and effect of the religious resurgence among Indonesian Muslims (Ibid.:51). For example, she argued that the memorisation of the Quran should be understood not so much a 'technology of the self', but rather as a way for Muslims to be (or

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17 Feener 2012:286. The quote 'honest ... mature' is found in Al Yasa Abubakar, Syari'at Islam di Provinsi Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam: Paradigma, Kebijakan, dan Kegiatan (Banda Aceh: Dinas Syariat Islam NAD, 2008), p. 81.
become) recognised as ‘preservers’ (hafiz, pl. hafaz) of Islamic tradition, thus increasing their social statuses. (Ibid.: 60) Although Gade’s work forms a significant contribution to the study of Islam in Indonesia, it also leaves unanswered important questions about the ways in which individual ethical projects interact with the political importance attached to pious expressions by the state. Clearly, it remains a challenge to develop solid theoretical and methodological frameworks for linking affect and self-development to changes in public and political morality.

To some extent, this is due to the slippery concept of ‘morality’ itself. An interesting approach, in this respect, was formulated recently by Jarrett Zigon, who has worked on post-socialist Russia. Unsatisfied with the undertheorised position of morality in anthropology, Zigon proposed conceptually separating morality from ethical practice. Morality, in this framework, may be seen as a combination of social-intellectual ‘spheres’: the institutional sphere, the (non-institutional) ‘public’ sphere, as well as the whole of embodied, largely non-conscious, moral dispositions related to the Bourdieuan understanding of habitus (Zigon 2009a; 2009b). Ethics, in contrast, denotes the conscious, reflective acts through which people cultivate their embodied capacity of morality. People experience regular, albeit often unpredictable, ‘moments’ of ethical consciousness (which Zigon called, somewhat awkwardly, moments of ‘moral breakdown’), when they become reflective and reflexive about their ‘moral way of being in the world’. It is this ‘conscious acting on oneself’ through which a person attempts to become a ‘morally appropriate and acceptable person not only in the eyes of others but also for oneself.’ (Zigon 2009a:82)

In the epigraph of this chapter I quoted Irma, a middle-aged mother of three living in Daruet, who said that many sins ‘go unnoticed’ (tidak nampak; lit. ‘do not become visible’). In similar vein, Yani explained to me that ‘most of the time we are not even aware of [our sins]’. Although such statements constitute genuine warnings, apparently referring to quite inflexible notions of discipline and divine punishment, I gradually realized that there was also a different charge to such comments. Ultimately, these expressions reflected the everyday nature of sins. At the same time, the distinction between knowing and not-knowing sins connects closely to the notions of awareness (kesadaran) and responsibility (tanggung jawab) emphasised by Rahmat and Yani when explaining their personal moral developments. It was on the basis of such ideas that they decided to ‘act on themselves’. But there is more to it. Knowing sins, as well as the understanding of what this knowledge effectuates, depends on experiences which are associated with the transitions between life phases. In some occasions, these are physical transitions or culturally determined rites of passage, like puberty (akhir baligh), which marks the start of the angels Munkar and Nakir’s judging and documenting of good and bad behaviour. Equally important, however, are the more elongated processes of personal transition, of which it is often unclear when they start and when they end.

Why are these transitions so important? One reason is a view shared by many Acehnese, that the more knowledgeable a person becomes, the more responsibilities he or she acquires, and the more likely (or grave), his or her sins become. A good example of the relationship between moral judgment and the transitions between life phases is the act of learning to perform rituals, such as prayer. Children learn how to pray by imitating their parents, the teungku meunasah, or the people they see praying in the meunasah. This process of imitating does not stop when children become adults. Adults who are uncertain about the way they perform the ritual may still look at the imam, or at people sitting in front of them, in order to improve their own movements and utterings. There is, however, a social tension in this type of interaction. People who feel that they have become more
knowledgeable, or ‘more aware’ (lebih sadar), may become careful, or even hesitant, to imitate others.

For example, Eri, the young man who played an important role in the previous chapter, regularly complained to me about the ‘poor’ standard of religious learning among the kampung and mosque leadership. He had learned to recite a large part of the Quran by heart, and upon his return to Daruet recognised certain mistakes in the congregational prayers led by kampung elders. For the people who did not have the knowledge to hear these mistakes, he argued, this did not matter at all (kalau orang nggak tahu salah itu, bukan masalah ikutnya, tapi kalau saya tahu, ikutnya dosa). But for him it created a dilemma. To keep on participating consciously (or ‘knowingly’) in these communal prayers would mean to sin, at least according to his own judgment. Thus, whenever the problem arose, Eri would sit quietly at the back of the mosque and pray for himself, or even decide to pray at home instead. The reverse also applied. I was told by several people, and in different contexts, that allowing oneself to be imitated by others (for example by accepting the responsibility to lead the prayer) was a risk for those who did not consider themselves to be sufficiently knowledgeable to carry the responsibility.

Another example of the distinction between knowing and not-knowing sins is the way in which my interlocutors experienced the fasting month (puasa). Generally, puasa was perceived by my interlocutors as a ‘month of forgiveness’ (bulan penuh ampun), in which the ‘door to God’ was opened (pintu Tuhan dibuka). This led, typically, to reflections on acts of self-discipline through an emphasis on controlling one’s own passions (mengontrol nafsu sendiri). This challenge (and of course the failure to live up to it) occasionally connected to emotions like fear (takut) and shame (malu). However, what emerged from many of my conversations was not so much the fear of sinning, but rather the fear of failing to put to good use the opportunities associated with puasa. I once asked my seventeen year old neighbour, Santi, whether the thought of sinning weighed more heavily on her during puasa. She thought about this for a moment, and then decided: ‘No, that is not the point. Many of our sins we do not even know (…) It is just that this is a month of seeking divine rewards (cuma ini bulan cari pahala).’ Like many of my other interlocutors, Santi believed that puasa constituted an opportunity for dealing with unknown sins.

The distinction between knowing and not-knowing sins, and its connection to the subjective experience of (sudden or elongated) transitions between life phases, is an important factor in explaining ordinary Acehnese’ flexibility in legitimising individual behaviour. This becomes particularly clear when taking into account ordinary Acehnese’ reactions on the Shari’a revival. One of the channels through which Rahmat was confronted on a regular basis with the notion of state Shari’a was the sermons of religious teachers, in the village or in the market mosque. He was generally critical of these sermons. In the past, he argued, religious teachers taught villagers ‘what was right and what was wrong, without additional interests (tanpa bunga).’ Today, what they cared about most, at least according to Rahmat, was money. This does not mean that he did not care about their messages at all. He once returned from the market mosque on Friday and spoke enthusiastically about the sermon. The preacher had talked about repentance, and about the importance of asking forgiveness from other people for past wrongdoings (pokoknya minta maaf sama orang). ‘This is very important!’ he stressed. ‘Imagine that someone dies. No regret could be shown, and no forgiveness could be given. The sin would remain (tetap dosa).’ This was something Rahmat worried about, much more than the ways of addressing sinful behaviour by making new government laws. About the state implementation of Shari’a, then, he was simply indifferent. Once when I asked his opinion
about it, he said: ‘if they do this, they should do it properly.’ Government law, he argued, was not designed to apply to important people (orang besar). If the courts would start cutting off hands, perhaps, corrupt and hypocritical politicians might be challenged. But when I asked him whether he supported politicians who endorsed Shari’a, he replied: ‘I am already old. This is something for young people to solve.’

One of those young people was Yani, and she was more pronounced about this than Rahmat. Her life (and that of other young women) was directly affected by the new morality rules:

In Jakarta women are free to wear a tanktop, or a short top. Here, in Aceh, this is not allowed (di sini tidak diperbolehkan). If people have the [religious] intention (niat) to wear a headscarf outside the house, they can, but they can wear whatever. Here it is different (…) I think it would be better if people were not forced (menurut Yani kalau jangan memaksan), it should be people’s own wish (keinginan sendiri). Actually I did not yet have this wish to wear a headscarf. But because Shari’a has already been implemented, and the headscarf is obliged, we wear it (karena di sini sudah sisyariatkan Islam harus berjilbab, kita pakai).

In line with these comments, it is not so strange that she detested the Shari’a police, as it carried out raids (raziyah) on the streets and near beaches to lecture people (especially women) accused of breaking Shari’a regulations. She complained that they were too strict, inspecting women on ‘everything, including tight clothes.’ Using a common formula, she argued that ‘we [the Acehnese] are not ready yet (kita belum siap)’. She preferred going to the beach without covering up her whole body, but because she felt little for ‘being humiliated’ (dipermalukan), she chose to comply (kami ikut saja, ‘we just follow [the rules]’). If in her own neighbourhood she was prepared to stand her ground, she was genuinely afraid of the raziyah. At the same time, the practice of wearing a headscarf itself did not cause Yani much trouble. In the contrary, she was rather positive about it, explaining that, once she got used to it, she felt ‘more tidy’ (rapı), ‘clean’ (bersih) and ‘comfortable’ (senang), even if this did not change her opinion that expressions of piety should ‘come from the heart’ (dalam hati).

If Yani’s story is an example of personal appropriation of Shari’a-inspired norms, and Rachmat’s one of indifference, the section about Aris and Indra – and their approach to the practice of gambling – offers some important clues about the process of selection. To a certain extent, Indra’s approach to Shari’a law resonated with the opinion of Yani, and many others critical of the way in which the law was enforced. Gambling, he explained, was a very common practice in Banda Aceh, both before and after the implementation of Shari’a law. The only difference, he claimed, was that, in the past, men simply filled in their lottery form in the kedai kopi, and today they had to buy their numbers in secret. ‘It has become a public secret (rahasia umum)’, he stated. The ban under Shari’a law evoked a cynical reaction. The only meaningful effect, he thought, was that police were given yet another reason to make money. Thus, he stated that ‘my phone has now become a piece of evidence’ (barang bukti). In his view, Shari’a was directed primarily to ‘small people’ (orang kecil): ‘If they want to do something about gambling, they should take on the centre (pusat), tackling the bosses (towkay), not the people who play (orang yang main).’ In this sense, he considered Shari’a enforcement to go straight against ‘social justice’ (keadilan sosial), as embedded in the pancasila (which, like many Indonesians, he was able to recite by heart).18

18 In a conversation about Shari’a law, and the role of the WH in particular, Indra told me about a friend who was caught for khalwat (seclusion), brought to the WH office, and released again after it became
Yet this is not the argument I found most striking about Aris’ and Indra’s approach to gambling as a morally suspect practice. If anything stood out in our conversations, it must be that they hardly referred to it as ‘sinful’ (dosa), despite the fact that perjudian is one of the major domains in which Shari’a criminal law has been put in effect by the state. Certainly, they thought of judi as a ‘passion’ (nafsu) that implied weakness. But although the qunun on maysir is another step in its criminalisation, the important point is that neither one of them made gambling a major concern affecting their personal relation with God. In this sense, their story is an example of how – at least in this particular context – Shari’a laws do not seem to have the effect envisioned by people such as Al Yasa Abubakar, who regarded these measures as an instrument to ‘perfect’ standardised Islamic norms at the level of the individual.

Rather than simply rejecting or adopting state and public discourses, the people introduced in this chapter actively selected and appropriated ‘official’ moral discourses in order to make decisions, assess emotions, or justify behaviour. In this sense there is considerable overlap between their experiences and the ideas about internalisation theorised by Gade. At the same time, it should be noted that the powerful affective qualities of individual ethical improvement provide ordinary Muslims with considerable agency regarding the judgment and adaptation of the standardized models propagated by the state. It is in this dialectic that Zigon’s theory of ethical practice becomes applicable to the Acehnese context of Islamic morality. The interplay between expressed beliefs, emotion, and power may be further refined, however, by addressing what Michael Lambek (2000) and Fredrik Barth (1993) have called ‘concerns’. According to Lambek, within the conceptual domain of religion there is per se a tension between the fields of power and morality. More specifically, morality may be seen as a culturally embedded alternative to power, in the sense that everyday practice distorts, changes, or subverts power in a variety of ways. Rachmat, Yani, and Indra were not particularly enthusiastic about Shari’a law, and the same might also be said about Aris. At the same time, it would be wrong to understand their reactions primarily in terms of defiance, or even discipline at large. Rather, these people selected and appropriated some elements in these discourses, while rejecting, ignoring, or rendering irrelevant other elements. The logic undergirding this routine of selecting and appropriating was driven by processes of ethical improvement which they interpreted as life-long, fragmented, and in the end highly personal.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on the lives of four individuals – Rahmat, Yani, and the two friends Aris and Indra, in order to investigate how they dealt, in the current context of the state implementation of Islamic law, with their own perceived ‘sins’. I have chosen this approach in order to get to a closer understanding of what it means to ordinary Acehnese people to engage with the domain that is commonly referred to as ‘ethics’.

Although the people central in this chapter were very different from each other – in terms of gender, age, education, character, and living environment, there is one particular feature in which their religious lives were very similar. This was not the fact clear that his family counted some influential figures. For him, this showed that the system was entirely corrupted. ‘Anyway’, he added, it means little when I say this.’ I said: ‘But you have the right (hak) to have an opinion about it,’ upon which Indra spitted the word back in my face: ‘The right? What right? I have no education (pendidikan). If people say this to me, and that, I would not know what to answer. I don’t know about the law (hukum). I have no knowledge whatsoever (nggak punya ilmu apa pun), small people have no rights (orang kecil nggak ada hak)’
that they referred to themselves as 'Acehnese', and therefore particularly pious (although this did, at least in certain contexts, play a role). Rather, it was the fact that all of them regarded the morality of their own existences as a personal process to be continuously 'acted' upon. I have tried to connect this individualistic perspective to a broadly shared 'cultural' concern, namely the general acceptance in Aceh that the sinfulness of personal behaviour does not necessarily 'reveal' itself at all times. The way in which sinfulness becomes visible – or stays hidden – is closely connected to the concerns thought specific to one's life phase. Thus, the moments on which sins reveal themselves and inspire action, are caught not only in terms of the need to be 'disciplined', but also in terms of composure, awareness, guilt, disappointment, as well as the ambiguous qualities of failure and success. All of these were connected, in turn, to an individual conceptualisation of moral responsibility.

It is in this individual domain, then, that a particular form of agency may be located, which for a long time has been underestimated, in the study of Aceh and of Islamic societies more broadly. Just like elsewhere, the agencies of ordinary people in Aceh are contingent on a combination of shifting identities, social and cultural capital, repertoires of power, and a wide variety of learnt practices and behaviour often referred to as 'habitus'. Class and gender form particularly important categories, as these are used to organise agency, that is the capacity to act in a particular way, in culturally recognisable, acceptable, but also flexible frameworks of meaning. However, the ability to practice Islam both within a socially defined set of norms and on the basis of an adapted, individualised interpretation of these norms is never 'just derived' from classed or gendered markers of difference. The agency I have tried to draw out in the ethnography in this chapter – and in this dissertation at large – reflects an expression of religious consciousness, which includes certainty and truth as much as ambiguity and doubt. This is a form of agency that is explicitly religious in nature, and must be understood exactly in these terms.