CHAPTER 8  CONCLUSION

When Aceh is featured in national media, whether in Indonesia, Europe, or the US, the focus is often on Islamic law. Does the process of Shari’a implementation in Aceh mean that Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, is gradually becoming an ‘Islamic state’? Or is this province, historically rebellious and self-consciously religious, an exception, which ultimately has little to say about the rest of the country and the region? Such reports often tend to ignore debates taking place in Aceh itself, in the provincial parliament or in neighbourhood coffee shops. Various analysts and opinion makers in Aceh have been critical, arguing that the current Shari’a regulations, or the ways in which these have been enforced, are discriminatory in nature, affecting women rather than men, and the poor rather than the rich. Another often-heard comment is that ‘the Acehnese’ have never asked for these laws, that they ‘already have Shari’a’, and do not need the help of the government to tell them how to practice their religion. A common denominator in these responses is the view that the implementation of Shari’a was orchestrated by a small group of conservative local politicians and Islamic activists, in cooperation with the national government, which regarded it as a tool for accelerating the resolution of the conflict. In the meantime, a good many Jakarta pundits, including a number of legal scholars from different universities, have simply argued that, ‘if this is what Aceh wants’, there is little that anyone should try to do about it.

Judging from these debates, it often seems that the majority of Acehnese are only passive players in the making of their own future. This dissertation rejects such a view. People in Aceh, I have been intent to show in the preceding chapters, rely on their own personal space for action as they negotiate the norms established ‘for them’ by state institutions and religious functionaries. The resulting interactions should be reduced neither to the domain of ‘resistance’ (cf. Scott 1985), nor to an autonomous domain of ‘personal piety’ (Mahmood 2005). Also, I have tried to stay clear from reifying the artificial dichotomy between normative Islam and ‘lived’ experience (as one finds, for example, in Andrew Beatty’s [2009] otherwise marvellous description of religious life in Java). Instead, I have found a central theoretical basis in the idea advanced by Michael Lambek, that morality – the domain where the ‘good’ is articulated and appropriate behaviour is defined – constitutes an existential alternative to the realm of power. Morality and power are closely connected concepts, but they do not share the central terms in which human existence is cast.

The complex of moral interactions involves a particular form of agency, that is, a ‘capacity to act’ (Ahearn 2001). In this dissertation I employ the term ‘religious agency’ as the capacity of individual Muslims to engage in religiously defined moral actions. Agency is a crucial concept, because of the way in which it expands and contracts possibilities, options, and choices. Powerful actors, be they individuals, institutions, or the state, set limits to this space, but not always as they intend. Obviously, individual agency is not the same for every person. It is contingent, depending in its scope on the context in which it is produced. However, this heterogeneity does not make it less important or more difficult to identify. The crucial point is that an exclusive focus on power relations will lead to an overly simplistic understanding of the ways in which religion informs society. Religious experience and expression must be taken seriously, neither reified nor discarded as an object of social analysis.
Although this dissertation is not a study of politics, the role of the state is always present throughout the chapters. In a great part of the world, the development of the modern state has been accompanied by a gradual officialisation of religious thought and practice (Bayly:480). One of the most important realms in which the state has tried to control religious affairs is that of education. In the Muslim world, this was traditionally the domain of the *ulama*, scholars of religious law. At the same time, both the state and the institutions born from (local) traditions of organized religion have penetrated into the sphere of ‘private’ life, elaborating the norms that guide people on the progressive path to the formation of a ‘good’ society. Yet what I have tried to demonstrate is that the boundaries between these realms – that of the state, organized religion, and individual agency – are not fixed or unequivocal. They mean different things to different people. They are ambiguous, easily unsettled, and (sometimes violently) contested. It is important to emphasize that many of my interlocutors in Aceh were acutely aware of, and often quite articulate about, the frayed nature of formal norms. For them these blurred boundaries were hardly something to be surprised about.

In recent years scholars of Islam have increasingly addressed questions of personal piety and the ethical ‘working on the self’. This shift to individual religiosity has led to important new perspectives on the nature of agency in Muslim societies. Many of these studies, however, employ a (nearly) exclusive focus on practices of (self-)discipline. As a result, personal religiosity has been studied primarily within the paradigm of pious practice (such as prayer, or religious study). This dissertation builds on the work of scholars who have criticized the focus on discipline as a central organizing principle for analysis, but I have also tried to view the ‘inner’ aspects of everyday moralities as an ambiguous process, guided by the question of how individuals truly try to meet prevailing norms while simultaneously and creatively building their identity as individual Muslims. Processes of ethical improvement are based not only on a personal ‘pursuit of piety’, but also on (self-perceived) setbacks, feelings of inability, ‘weakness’, and ‘error’. Thus, I have attempted to explicitly draw into the analysis the factor of ‘failure’. Many people in Aceh identify and acknowledge personal failures as a part of, rather than a hindrance to, the process of becoming a ‘good’ Muslim. Seen from this perspective, the sense of failure appears to be a meaningful factor in the creation of religious agency. Without a notion of failure, ethical improvement is impossible.

Religious agency is an historical phenomenon, which has developed in continuous dialectic with the forces of normative Islam. In Chapter 1, in which I explain my central approach, I distinguish between the state and organized religion as the two most important socio-political forces that seek to lay a truth claim on the definition of ‘correct’ religious norms and concurrent behaviour. A tension exists between these forces, deriving, as Max Weber already noted, from the fact that the legitimacy of political and religious institutions builds on different forms of authority. At the same time, these forces have been mitigated and transformed as part of the processes of social and political interaction ‘on the ground’. People in Aceh, be they rich and influential or poor and marginalized, have at their disposal a variety of strategies to enlarge their space for moral action. Religious agency includes the capability of people to make use of state and religious institutions, contesting the question what it means to be a ‘good’ Muslim. This process of space-making, taking place at different social, temporal and geographical levels, from the imagination of Aceh and its place in the world to the formation of individual morality in the context of local (‘village’) sociality, is the central theme of this dissertation.

The first major shift I have identified took place in the eighteenth century, when the *ulama* began to establish themselves as a largely autonomous force in the rural
interiors. I focus on this period in Chapter 2, which draws attention to a transformation from religious authority based on a dominant divine kingship model, toward the possibility of an alternative model of authority based on a more open transmission of religious knowledge. In the seventeenth century, the ulama were based in port cities and at the court. Some of them were able to obtain powerful positions because of their knowledge of Islamic law and mystical sciences. However, from the eighteenth century onwards this group increasingly asserted itself within autonomous, rural centres of religious authority. Contingent on this change, individual reflection on ethical improvement became an important new signifier of the moral order at large.

The decentralization of religious authority made it difficult for Dutch colonial forces to subject the territory they thought to be controlled by the Sultan of Aceh. The 'Aceh War' started in 1873 and never really ended. Sultan Muhammad Daud Syah surrendered in 1903, after which the Sultanate was abolished, but violent incidents continued to occur until the late 1930s. At the same time, crucial changes were taking place. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, the late colonial period in Aceh is comparable to what Philipp Blom (2008) termed the 'Vertigo Years' for Europe: a time of great speed. In the 1920s and 1930s, the colonial government, depending on the cooperation of indigenous chiefs and the work of many 'local' and other ('non-Acehnese') native public servants, embarked on an ambitious, high-speed project of building a civil state based on the rule of law and the creation of modern institutions. Representatives of religious authority were indirectly involved in this process. The colonial government made only frugal use of religious officials and advisors, leaving 'religion' in the political and juridical domains of the indigenous chiefs. However, religious authority and the colonial state did not form closed spheres. Islam – especially in its mystical variants – was perceived by the Dutch as a factor of risk. Although it was not always explicitly stated, the colonial state set rather clear parameters of 'acceptable' religious practice.

Islamic modernism, the collection of initiatives to uplift the Islamic community by returning to the 'true' tenets of the religion and reconciling religious lifestyles with the aspects of modern society and technology, has often been viewed as an inherently 'anti-colonial' phenomenon. This is especially the case in Aceh, where the modernist movement developed alongside the creation of a local-specific, ethnic framework (crystallizing ultimately in the Acehnese organisation of reformist ulama, the PUSA). In Chapter 3 I have criticised this view. Expressions of Islamic modernism resonated closely with the way in which the colonial government tried to shape 'Aceh' as a definable (and thus governable) entity. As part of this process, the religious and ethnic variety that characterized society gradually became supplanted by a vision of progress, based on a dichotomous, and increasingly inflexible project of social and geographic imagination. The rural area around Banda Aceh and the fertile valleys along the North coast were associated with the 'new' colonial Aceh: modern, future-oriented, industrialized, ethnically 'pure', and strict in scripturalist doctrine. The PUSA emerged in the wake of this discourse. At the same time, both colonial administrators and indigenous chiefs were fearful that more 'suspectable' areas were infected by dangerous, deviant ideas. The latter included 'political' influences, seeping into Aceh from adjacent West Sumatra or arriving straight from the Middle East, as well as the heretical expressions of tarekat leaders, thought to bubble up spontaneously in the uneducated and isolated parts of the Acehnese West coast. The PUSA played a central role in the eviction of the Dutch. But this dramatic result was hardly foreshadowed: in the political climate of the 1930s, a 'native' current of reformist Muslim activism represented an approved, 'legitimate' addition to Dutch-style modernization. This becomes clear, for example, from the way in which the colonial government endorsed,
sometimes explicitly, the actions undertaken against Ahmadiyah propagandists by the
reformist ulama who formed the PUSA at the end of the decade.

In the Japanese period PUSA leaders were granted significant power, and in the
first turbulent years of Indonesian independence they became the central players in the
creation of a highly autonomous provincial government. This was at the cost of the class of
local rulers, many of whom were killed in the violent struggle for power known as the
Social Revolution. However, in the 1950s the Indonesian central state gradually became
more assertive. The decision to incorporate Aceh in a new and enlarged province of North
Sumatra – centred on nearby Medan – persuaded radical ulama, led by former PUSA
chairman Daud Beureueh, to declare a rebellion in the name of Islam, which lasted until
1962. The Darul Islam formed an important political alternative to the central Indonesian
government. Chapter 4 focuses on local trajectories of change in the rural district of Aceh
Besar, in order to show that the influence of Shari'a-minded reformers was uneven and
temporary in nature. Chandra Jayawardena, an anthropologist who conducted
ethnographic fieldwork in the area of Indrapuri in the early 1970s, noted the variety of
religious and political currents becoming entangled in the struggle for power and
resources. Making use of the Jayawardena notes, I have argued that, in the early New
Order years, the village level became increasingly important as a locus of political and
religious contestations. The main catalyst for this process was the local level intrusion of
the state, through the expansion of the administrative and bureaucratic apparatus, as well
as the reactions to this process by non-government actors. As a main example, I pay
considerable attention to a conflict in the village of Lheueh, in the sub-district of Indrapuri.

In Lheueh, Jayawardena was confronted with an apparently minor dispute over the
payment of fitrah (yearly religious tithes), which turned out to reveal a complex of state
power, religious authority, and the agency of a group of ordinary villagers making use of
these resources to protect their own interests and space for action.

The following three chapters are based primarily on ethnographic material.
Chapter 5, based on my fieldwork in the rural village of Juroung, follows this process of
state assertion into the present, shifting the focus to the way in which the state has
affected the role of the ulama and the religious agencies of ordinary villagers. More
specifically, I have tried to apply some nuances to the scholarly view of Acehnese
‘resistance’ against the state. In Aceh the state is one of the most important resources
available. This fact comes with important implications for the ways in which we should
address the construction and appropriation of religious norms. In the independence
period religious scholars and lay Muslims have been increasingly preoccupied with the
question what the state can do for them, both in a worldly and a spiritual sense. This
means that the state, besides a means to ‘enforce’ a certain set of norms on society, is also
a crucial arena for contestation, which can be seized upon to legitimize behaviour, advance
interests, avoid punishment, and adapt prevailing norms. The state, in other words, offers
space for religious manoeuvring as much as it determines forms of enforcement and
punitive action. This chapter demonstrates that this conception of the state also alters the
prevalent views of religious authority, as vested traditionally in the social position of the
ulama. Younger generations are increasingly prepared to view the ulama as either tied to,
or as agents of, the state, and to address their role (which remains significant) as such.
Although the chapter contains multiple examples, I have given particular attention to the
divergent views and strategies of Zainuddin and his son Fendi, which were revealed to me
when the mischievous behaviour of the youngest son Irwan added another chapter to the
fraught relationship between the village and the dayah.
The argument about the relationship between religious authority and state intrusion has a relevance beyond the particularities of Aceh scholarship. Generalizing theories about the role of religion in the modern world often assume that state interference in religious affairs diminishes ordinary Muslims’ space for moral action. But in the context of Aceh, this is only partly true. There is no question that the ‘options’ for people to engage in particular religious practices have decreased because of the state. At the same time, however, the ‘state-system’ has been actively shaped, altered, and appropriated by the people whose religiosities it claims to govern. This leads to the seemingly rather paradoxical conclusion that, although options become fewer, religious agencies have not necessarily decreased. While the state functions as a disciplinary force, it also provides people with the tools to adapt official norms to their own individual interests.

The final part of this dissertation moves away from the state as central category of analysis, centralising instead the investigation of everyday religious practice and experience. In contrast to some influential recent studies of religious self-styling in Muslim contexts, I have not sought to focus specifically on people involved in a self-declared pursuit of pious ‘perfection’. My interviews and conversations concentrated on different concerns: work, education, and everyday trials and tribulations; family, friendship and village sociality; personal disappointments and aspirations. In this sense, this is a study of the ‘ordinary lives of people’ rather than the ‘lives of ordinary people’ (Schulte Nordholt and Steijlen 2007:4). For me, the major question was how, and when, in this kind of conversation Islam became important, both as a topic and as an explanatory framework. To an extent, this approach has resulted in a rather rigorous de-exceptionalising of Acehnese society. Although Aceh is often presented as a ‘special case’, I find it important to emphasize that Acehnese Muslims struggle, in a way that is comparable to Muslims elsewhere in Southeast Asia and the rest of the world, with the tensions and contradictions between normative, ‘universal’, or globalizing Islam, and the norms and practices associated with other categories of moral actions, such as the local customs and traditions commonly known as adat.

This argument is drawn out in detail in Chapter 6, which shifts the attention to my Banda Aceh field site Blang Daruet, and deals with the relationship between Eri, a young man featuring a strong, outwardly pious expression inspired by the global revivalist movement, and his parents Ikhsan and Meli. Their family, including five other children, miraculously survived the destructive 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which razed to the ground their entire neighbourhood, and took away countless lives in the city of Banda Aceh and along the coast. The tsunami was an important category for moral inquiry. However, as I have argued, it also functioned as a container discourse, concealing and distorting moral concerns as much as it brought these to the fore. It is often stated that Aceh, because of the civil war and the strong ‘regional’ identity of Acehnese, has shown itself more or less ‘immune’ to the influence of global Islamic revivalism. While it is true that national and transnational Islamic activist organisations and political parties have experienced difficulties to establish themselves in Aceh, it would be a mistake to think that political developments have ‘isolated’ the region. In this chapter I show that, rather than challenging their son’s scripturalist admonitions on the basis of a reified notion of Acehnese culture or ‘tradition’, Meli and Ikhsan were receptive to some ideas, and actively contested others. They did not simply ‘adopt or ‘discard’ Eri’s views as a coherent ‘way of life’. Instead, they accommodated his recommendations as a part of their own, personally framed style of moral improvement. This was done in quite different ways, partly contingent on the difference in gender but also – and this is the point I have stressed – on
the fact that they perceived themselves to be in a very different stage in life, thus requiring contrasting stances toward piety, 'purity', and the definition of correct behaviour.

As these observations clearly show, the tensions between the 'global' and the 'local' are not usually perceived as an impediment for personal approaches to ethical improvement. On the contrary, they offer central points of reference in the everyday reflections on personal choices, concerns, problems, and dilemmas. Chapter 7 uses this conclusion as a point of departure for a more nuanced approach to the current implementation of state Shari'a law.

Three extensive vignettes, in which I try to give texture to the lives of Rahmat, Yani, and the youthful barbers Aris and Indra, function to draw out an important pattern in the construction of religious norms in Aceh, namely the distinction between 'knowing' and 'non-knowing sins'. The concept of 'sinning' has two faces. It is both objective and dependent on a person's religious knowledge. This basic principle provides insight in the different ways in which people in Aceh are able to circumvent, reinterpret and appropriate the totalizing discourse of state Shari'a. By this, I do not mean to trivialize the impact of the new Shari'a laws, which can be considerable, and highly disconcerting for those who feel constrained in their convictions and everyday practices. Shari'a is a means of exerting power, intended, as a former head of the state Shari'a Office expressed it, to make 'better' people by subjecting them to a particular interpretation of Islam. Nonetheless, I think it is this kind of intention which ensures that it will always fall short of its goals. The aim of 'bringing into line' the Acehnese people at the level of their deepest inner motivations runs counter to the way in which many of my interlocutors engaged, on an everyday basis, with the process of ethical improvement: a process that is personal, context dependent, and often unpredictable.

The urgent question, then, is what the Shari'a project so far has done, in a general sense, to people's individual spaces for negotiation. Is the implementation of Shari'a law changing the conditions under which people act, voice their opinions, or call into question dominant models of knowledge, practice, and 'truth'? And if yes, how does this take shape in the context of their everyday lives? Acknowledging the limits of state power should not keep us from taking into account the nature of deeper discursive trends, which on the long term might channel people's thoughts and actions in particular 'pre-set' or newly assumed directions. On the one hand, it seems to be too early to formulate clear-cut answers to these questions. The implementation of Shari'a law at the provincial level is an extremely complicated experiment, informed by a plural legal framework (which includes also secular law and the recognition of adat law), ongoing negotiations between different administrative levels, and the possibility of the civil war flaring up always lurking in the background. Compared, for example, to the situation in Malaysia, crucial questions have yet to be addressed (or perhaps more precisely, 'tested' in court), such as the status of the Shari'a regulations vis a vis the Constitution and a range of Human Rights treatises signed by the Indonesian government. On the other hand, 'hard-line' approaches to Shari'a are being seized upon by populist politicians and stakeholders trying to increase their Islamic credentials. This is closely linked to another factor mentioned in Chapter 7, namely the use of Shari'a regulations to legitimise vigilante violence. In public, at home, and at most places 'in between' (such as Facebook profiles) defenders of religious 'pluralism' and practitioners of 'unofficial' or 'non-mainstream' thoughts and beliefs are losing ground. This process is not exclusively taking place in Aceh: there is not an essential difference between the ban placed on so-called 'deviant' groups in Aceh and the aggressive legal actions taken by the Indonesian government against the Ahmadiyah sect. These trends are not easily stopped, or turned around, because, as Michael Peletz (1997) already noted

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with regard to Malaysia, for those who are critical it may be more strategic to remain silent than to take the risk of being branded as ‘anti-Shari’a’ or ‘un-Islamic’.

I have argued that ordinary Muslims in Aceh possess individual religious agency, and that this enables them (some more than others) to negotiate the changes wrought on society by the state and institutions or exemplars of religious authority. One of my central suggestions, then, has been to distinguish between the various socio-political arenas in which these negotiations take place. It is my contention, that at least we consider the possibility that individual agency is expanding in some respects, and diminishing in others. Let me elaborate on this by making one possible distinction somewhat more explicit. In Aceh, public debate about the scope and intention of state Islamic law is lively and ideologically diverse, but also abstract and characterised by generalisations. This, it seems, is to the advantage of those who seek to advance, or expand, state Shari’a implementation, both in public discourse and in lived reality, where the boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’, ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’, are always blurred. But a question that seems equally important to me, is whether the ‘intrusion’ of state Islam in everyday life might also create a particular space for negotiation. The notion of individual religious agency creates an opportunity for considering the possibility of a rather counterintuitive development that, even if, ‘objectively’ speaking, options are decreasing, the majority of ordinary Muslims in Aceh might not experience this process as very ‘constraining’, for the choices they do have are based on complex personal assessments and personal considerations, thereby carrying relatively more ‘weight’.

Let me explain what I mean by this. The ethnographic chapters in particular bring to the forefront a connection between ethical improvement – through active reflection and self-styling – and the way in which ‘impersonal’, formal and bureaucratic norms are given shape in actual fact, in local-specific socio-political settings. In a ‘world of urgency and necessity’ (Wikan 1995), immediate personal desires (money, status, sexuality, and also spirituality) sometimes clash, and more often are reconciled with structural, political and economic constraints. As I have tried to show, the moral terms in which this process is cast are both socially grounded and specific to local concerns: safety, harmony, solidarity, a law that ‘applies’ (hukum yang berjalan). This leads me to consider the exciting, and potentially radical, possibility that the implementation of Shari’a law, as being the culmination of a more elongated process of purist reform intended not only to ‘discipline’, but also to ‘enlighten’ people, is gradually becoming so ‘universal’, dogmatic, and reliant on an abstracted model of human concerns, that it has entered a phase of ‘self-destructive’ dominance, in a way comparable – in a metaphorical sense – to the process in which the French Revolution ‘devoured’ its own children (Kresse 2003). It is most probably too early to tell. A more diachronic approach, and a more rigorous methodological approach to different ‘spaces’ of action and negotiation will be needed for such questions to bring about satisfactory results in the future.

I would like to end by stating what, in my view, is the main contribution of this dissertation to the study of Aceh, and to the history and anthropology of Islamic societies more broadly. I started out, in Chapter 1, with a brief recapitulation of what I believe is the dominant, standard narrative of Acehnese history. This narrative is marked by two major frameworks: religious zeal and conflict. But this dissertation shows that the ways in which people in Aceh practice and experience is not only diverse, but also personal in nature, and contingent on individualised projects of ethical improvement. As such, this dissertation corrects the standard image, and the stereotypes of Acehnese fanaticism it has produced. However, this argument also has implications for the more general question of ‘religiosity’.
as a central object of analysis, and, at a more abstract level, the categories and mechanisms through which ‘differences’ are integrated into the moral order of societies.

Michael Peletz (1996) has argued that it is insufficient to simply point out ‘alternative’ moral frameworks (such as adat) to understand how mainstream or ‘deviant’ thought and behaviour are constructed. Throughout their lives, people seize on, and become influenced by, a variety of (political and religious) ideologies, which are grounded in different social hierarchies and divergent frameworks of knowledge or ‘truth’ seeking practices. The interactions between different ideologies, as well as the ways in which people position themselves in relation to these ideologies, produce moral ambivalences. Unsurprisingly, then, the stories, experiences and events that support my argument are full of doubts, dilemmas and (sometimes difficult or even painful) self-reflections of human beings as ‘acting subjects’ (Ortner 2006). From this premise, I have attempted to rethink the use of social categories in the study of Islam in Southeast Asia. One of the major problems in this field, I argue, is the common emphasis on gender and class identifications as a means to explain religious differences. This emphasis tends to marginalise the analysis of religious agency, and the ways in which people claim responsibility for their moral actions on the basis of religious identity.

So how can we refine, within the more general contours of ‘religious identity’, the relationship between agency and the concept of moral personhood? In Chapter 1 I referred to the work of Francis Robinson, who (in the spirit of Charles Taylor), made a strong case for the development in the modern era of a distinct Muslim ‘self’, locating this process in the turbulence caused by Muslim activism. Some readers might be surprised, therefore, that the attention I have given to activist Islam has actually been limited. This has a reason. Already during my fieldwork, I found that the kind of personhood I encountered could not be simply equated with the models of ethical improvement central to activist concerns. Most of my interlocutors were not particularly interested in the political and judicial struggles involved in the ideal of changing society. From this, I concluded that it was necessary to work toward a theory of Muslim personhood that is less deterministic, more nuanced and inclusive, than the one that is central to many studies of ‘pious’ practice and the global Islamic ‘revival’ (which, I should add, is largely supported by middle class activists). Points of concern that should be included in such a theory are, besides moral ambivalence, modes of ‘indifference’, and the social acceptance of imperfection and failure.

In this dissertation I have used the comparable notions of ‘concerns’ (Barth 1993) and that of the ‘ethical working on oneself’ (Zigon 2009b) to assess how people reflect on their lives and their past, and how they act upon it. One line of investigation, which runs throughout the pages of this dissertation, and which I see as a possible fruitful avenue for further discussing the question of Muslim personhood in the future, is that of age and generation. Compared to the categories of gender and class, the role of life-phase and generational interaction in the development of Muslim personhood constitutes a highly underdeveloped terrain. This is not so strange, perhaps. Difficulties immediately emerge when trying to make a useful analytical concept based on the perception of life-phase. One is the, at first sight unavoidable, conflation of ‘this-worldly’ and ‘other-worldly’ explanatory models. Young people grow up, and become socialized and educated in a world that is very different from that of their parents. At the same time, young people usually care less than their elders about the afterlife, for in general they do not feel that they are close to death. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to usefully ‘compare’ the moral actions of younger and older generations, as a way of determining the role of life-phase in religious change.
Instead of approaching age as a factor of 'comparison', then, it might be more useful to treat life-phase identification, like Peletz (1988:227-30) has treated kinship, as a double-edged sword. When people become older, their position in the moral order changes, and this is closely connected to the 'personalised' aspects of religiosity I have emphasized: awareness, consciousness, reflexiveness. At the same time, the moral responsibilities associated with 'aging' – both to society and to oneself – are often difficult to fulfil, especially when society is changing fast. In such an approach, age, and the kinds of moral personhood attached to it, does not signify a 'point in time', but rather an aggregate of temporalities and associated senses of religiosity. As I have tried to show, most Acehnese – just like people elsewhere – do not regard their own life as a straight path. They deal with countless setbacks, differences of opinion, and personal failures as they attempt to give meaning to their moral lives. The particularities of Muslim personhood in Aceh should not be sought in the adherence to an externally defined Muslim 'piety'. If the religiosity of the Acehnese is 'special', it is because these setbacks have become an explicit part of their moral order, not despite, but because of their everyday interaction with the forces of normative Islam.