“That is Jakarta’s Project”: Views from the Acehnese Diaspora on Shari’a, Self-determination and Political Conspiracy

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The way I see Shari’a is implemented in Aceh, it serves more the political interests of the central government, but this is not how Shari’a actually ought to be.

Online correspondence with an anonymous informant based in Sweden,
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Most chapters in this volume analyse the perspectives on Shari’a and its implementation by Acehnese who live in Aceh. There are, however, several thousand Acehnese living overseas for various lengths of time. While physically distant, many of these diaspora Acehnese have been actively engaged with political developments back in Aceh for years. Their views on religious and political developments should not be ignored, as they add an important dimension to broader discourses on Shari’a and society in contemporary Aceh. State Shari’a has changed not only aspects of life in Aceh, but also the views on the role of Islam as part of Acehnese identity across the Acehnese diaspora.

This chapter discusses the highly critical views with regard to the implementation of Shari’a in Aceh, as held by some Acehnese residing outside their

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1 Throughout this chapter I will not reveal the names of my interlocutors as I have promised them to protect their identities before obtaining information that can be considered rather sensitive. However, some details on how I recruited my informants, their general backgrounds as well as their current residencies are provided throughout the chapter.

MAP 2 The Acehnese diaspora in the world

homeland, and asks why Acehnese diasporans have developed such different views from those prevalent in Aceh itself. As has been observed in various case studies, diasporic perceptions of homeland developments often differ dramatically from those of people in the homeland, in spite of all the instantaneous telecommunication methods available since the late twentieth century (Caruthers 2008; Winland 2002). People in the diaspora tend to interpret homeland developments from a different perspective, which is more often than not shaped by what I would call 'emotional time warps.' Caught in between longing for the homeland and yet being disconnected from it for a long time can result in rather biased views on the homeland, which in turn develop almost independently from the current debates and social realities back in the homeland.

When it comes to evaluating perceptions of the implementation of Shari'a in Aceh, it is striking to see how the thoughts of Acehnese in diaspora in Europe and Australia differ greatly from many of their fellow Acehnese back home. During my inquiries into the subject I discovered that rather hostile stances and outright disapproval exist among Acehnese diasporans in relation to the implementation of Shari'a in the homeland. Unlike their fellow Acehnese back home, many of whom express moderate criticism, followed by a wish for pragmatic improvements toward a more satisfying realization of Shari'a (Feener 2013b; Großmann, this volume; Idria, this volume), the opinions given by Acehnese diasporans ranged from describing the implementation of Shari'a in Aceh as "pure manipulation created by the national government in Jakarta to continue to control the politics in Aceh" (as expressed in the title of this chapter as "Jakarta's project") and as "besmirching Aceh's image in the eyes of the world as religious fundamentalists," to straightforward calls to abolish the state Shari'a system completely.

The diasporic views on Shari'a in Aceh cannot be understood without taking into account the background of the conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka/GAM) and the Indonesian state. Indeed, the very making of the Acehnese diaspora was the result of the conflict, which caused considerable numbers of GAM leaders to flee into exile abroad. Diasporic Acehnese have been exposed to Western (post-)modern and secular societies, especially when living in Scandinavia, Australia or the US, and therefore have accumulated manifold experiences that have affected their personal religious views and practices. More importantly, many of them left Aceh in the late 1990s and early 2000s, before Shari'a was actually implemented, which means that they often only have second-hand knowledge about the daily realities of Shari'a implementation back home. What seems to be even more crucial for their collective opinion-making, is that their diasporic fervour always was (and still is)

more concerned with politics than with religion. This is because most diasporans see themselves as political refugees and victims of conflict rather than persecuted believers.

This is not to say that Acehnese in diaspora have not nurtured their religious heritage, especially in host societies that uphold cultural and religious values and norms that are different from theirs. It just means that religion was never the main trigger for their diasporization. In other words, religion was a means of developing strong group cohesion rather than a *raison d'être* for the diaspora. The reason for the Acehnese abroad to set up basic organizational structures was connected to their urge to support people back in Aceh from abroad during the conflict. While most of the diasporans lived in relative comfort and peace overseas, those remaining in Aceh suffered from the cruelties of the war, losing family members and property. As a number of scholars have pointed out in relation to other conflict-generated diasporas, the awareness of such diasporic privileges may trigger feelings of remorse (Lyons 2006; Radtke 2009; Skrbis 1999). In order to deal with this notion of 'migration guilt,' many diasporans tend to provide remittances and other donations regularly.

Before delving more deeply into the question why the Acehnese overseas take a more critical position toward Shari'a than their fellow Acehnese in the homeland, it needs to be pointed out that, in their explanations, my informants tended to perceive Shari'a in political terms. Although they sometimes differentiated between, for example, Shari'a as a legal instrument for creating a 'perfect state' on the one hand, and 'man-made' written regulations and specific by-laws (*qanun*) determining everyday praxis on the other, they were often inclined to formulate their criticism against Shari'a implementation in blunt terms. Broadly, to them Shari'a implementation in Aceh meant a so-called bogus package deal, the terms and composition of which the Acehnese people had no say in. In their view, divine Islamic law, in this sense, was nothing more than a label for policies set by the central Indonesian state in Jakarta. None of the informants criticized in detail specific aspects of implemented laws and by-laws, or tried to be up-to-date in relation to debates about draft versions or additional regulations. As it turned out later in my research, especially during the second and third rounds of inquiry, most of them were not familiar with the contents of Aceh's contemporary Shari'a legislation. Instead, they rejected the very idea of implementing an Islamic legal system in Aceh. For them it was not about improving or adopting specific regulations, because in their eyes the concession of the Indonesian government to implement Shari'a was based on deceitful principles. Given their generally highly antagonistic stance against the national government developed during the time of conflict in Aceh, their anti-Shari'a positions were consistent, and not altogether surprising.

In order to place my findings within a wider context, I will first provide an overview of the development of the Acehnese diaspora. This will be followed by some observations about the religiosity of Acehnese in diaspora, which reflect their wish to preserve not only their cultural heritage but also their religious identity, especially in non-Muslim host countries. I will then introduce the main points of criticism that were put forward by my informants with regard to Shari'a implementation in Aceh. Finally, I will analyse more thoroughly why the standpoints of the diasporans and the homelander differ so widely from each other when it comes to the issue of Shari'a in Aceh.

Acehnese in Diaspora

The largest contingent of Acehnese overseas lives in neighbouring Malaysia, which has been a home for many generations of Acehnese traders and businessmen (Reid 1969). The armed struggle for independence led by GAM founder Hasan Tiro, who himself had sought exile in Sweden, was for many the main cause for leaving Aceh. From the late 1970s onwards, there were several waves of emigration from Aceh across the Straits of Malacca, especially to Penang and Kuala Lumpur. Confronted with massive counter-strikes by the Indonesian military, GAM guerrillas left Aceh to escape retaliation, but also to continue their struggle for an independent state from abroad. Quite apart from those directly involved in the separatist conflict, ordinary Acehnese also had to cope for decades with the everyday realities of the ongoing conflict. Returning GAM guerrillas initiated several waves of aggression to resume the armed struggle, provoking renewed and intensified military reprisals. Civilians seeking refuge from the violence caused both by the guerrillas and the Indonesian security forces thus fled to Malaysia, adding to the Acehnese diaspora there. To an even greater extent, Acehnese were looking for economic opportunities in Malaysia due to the economic downturn and high unemployment in Aceh caused by the conflict.

At first, during the 1980s, Malaysia widely tolerated the Acehnese (and other labour migrants without proper work permits), because of its economic boom and the need for cheap labour. But during times of economic recession, and particularly following the Asian financial crisis of 1997, the Malaysian government sought to get rid of the foreign labour surplus (Battistella 2002; Pillai 1998; Rajaram, Kumar and Grundy-Warr 2004). Whereas many 'irregular' Indonesian labourers were deported back to Indonesia without much delay, however, Acehnese workers—with some exceptions—were mostly held in detention over a longer period of time (Missbach 2011a). Presumably, the Malaysian gov-

ernment did take the ongoing war in Aceh into consideration and tried to save the Acehnese from being sent back to a conflict area. Despite that, some hundred Acehnese were forcibly returned to Medan in 1998.

It was in these detention centres that many Acehnese became politicized by GAM-members, who were detained for involvement in the arms trade and for creating political unrest, as well as for basic immigration offenses. Apart from these involuntary meetings in prisons and detention centres, religious and social gatherings more generally served as regular venues for the Acehnese to discuss politics and exchange information. GAM members also tapped into a wide range of social networks in order to recruit young men, who would then be trained in Libya and later sent to Aceh to fight the Indonesian army (Aspinall 2009).

From the late 1990s onwards, Malaysia ceased to be a safe haven for the Acehnese. The Malaysian government took up a stronger stance toward unwanted refugees and irregular labour migrants, and even more so towards GAM leaders in hiding, leading to an increased number of arrests. As a result, more and more Acehnese applied to other countries for resettlement through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Although the number of Acehnese who were eventually resettled in Scandinavia, Canada and the US never exceeded 2,500 people in total (compared to at least 80,000 Acehnese in Malaysia at the peak of the Aceh conflict), this group turned out to be particularly influential with regard to developments in the homeland. People in Aceh directed their hopes to their countrymen in the West, expecting that they would be able to draw more international attention to the ongoing conflict and the human rights violations by the Indonesian military, and therefore to attract substantial international support for the Acehnese call for independence (Missbach 2011a). Not only did the Acehnese of the Western diaspora produce and circulate GAM propaganda and raise funds for GAM; they also served as contact points for Indonesian government officials and foreign diplomats, once the time for peace negotiations to end the almost thirty-year long conflict had arrived (Morfit 2007).

Current estimates of Acehnese living in Malaysia range between 20,000 and 30,000 people, as many have returned to Aceh since the end of the conflict.² Aside from Malaysia, there are significant Acehnese communities in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Australia, Canada and the US. These communities have developed since the late 1990s and consist of numbers ranging between 200 and 500 people per country. Most of them came as refugees, while a few were self-

2 Providing exact figures on Acehnese in Malaysia is difficult, as some enter(ed) irregularly.

exiled GAM members. Some could also be primarily categorized as economic migrants. In addition, we find Acehnese expatriates, economic migrants and students in a number of other places, including New Zealand, Singapore, Egypt, the Netherlands, Germany, Taiwan, Thailand, Russia, Spain, France, Turkey, Iran, the United Kingdom, Austria, India, Kuwait, Sudan and Saudi Arabia. As the numbers of Acehnese in those countries remained either too small, or their temporary residence too short, one could not find any community building or diasporization as was the case for the Acehnese in Scandinavia, Australia and North America. At most, there are student organizations or business networks.

During the time of conflict, most Acehnese in diaspora tended to see their stay overseas as temporary, and insisted that they would return one day when Aceh was peaceful and, preferably, independent.³ Resulting from this dominant homeland focus, social integration into the host country society did not appear to be particularly desirable for Acehnese in diaspora. Instead they tried to maintain their links to the homeland by preserving their cultural and linguistic characteristics while in diaspora. At least, this was the case in the first few years following their resettlement. After the end of the conflict, those Acehnese who did not return to Aceh often opted for a more active integration into the host society (Missbach 2010; 2011a). Over the years, some had taken well to life in diaspora and the advantages of the Western welfare state, affordable health insurance and education for their children, or even what could be called westernized lifestyles. Others kept insisting that they wished to return, yet at the same time were very suspicious toward the peace process, fearing that it might not hold. At the same time, despite welcoming the peace in Aceh, there were also widespread feelings of disappointment among the diasporans. People felt that their personal 'sacrifices'—leaving their homeland while supporting the struggle for Acehnese independence both financially and morally—were somehow left unrewarded. Although only a small number of diasporans publicly rejected the Helsinki peace deal and pledged to continue the struggle for Aceh's independence through non-violent means (Missbach 2011a; 2011b), many diasporans whom I got to know during my research still favoured the idea of Aceh's separation from the Indonesian state.

In this chapter, I concentrate mostly on the Acehnese communities in Europe and Australia and their views on, or engagement with, the implementa-

3 In the interviews I conducted most interlocutors would use the term (*me*)*rantau*. The concept of *merantau* means leaving home for a certain amount of time to gather experience, learn new skills and make one's fortune. In theory, there are no limits on how long one can be in the *perantauan* (i.e. foreign country).

tion of Shari'a in Aceh.⁴ In my previous fieldwork among the Acehnese diaspora, which was focused on the topic of long-distance politics, I did not deal primarily with issues related to religious developments, whether in Aceh or in the diaspora.⁵ For the purpose of this chapter, however, I visited some of my interlocutors in Australia again to conduct additional interviews. In addition, I contacted some of my former key informants in the US, Denmark, Sweden, Malaysia and Germany, distributing a questionnaire about their opinion on the outcome of Shari'a implementation in Aceh, and following up with conversations over email.

Given the massive socio-economic differences between, for example, Acehnese in Sweden (who tend to have more free time to spend on diasporic activities and online communication) and the Acehnese in Malaysia (who generally have to work harder due to a lack of state social welfare, and who often do not have the same quality access to internet compared to their fellow Acehnese in the West), in my analysis I need to take into account a certain response bias. Not all requested informants replied, yet those who did were very generous with their time in sharing their views with me, allowing for additional enquiries. As their answers often raised new questions, vivid long-distance dialogues took off. The decision to discuss all matters of concern only on a bilateral basis, and never in (online) group discussions, allowed me to dig deeper in what interested me the most, namely their personal views on the implementation of Islamic law. All quotations in this chapter are derived from interviews and email correspondence that took place between August and October 2011. Most interviews were conducted in Indonesian, except for one, which was held in German. Since most of my interlocutors preferred anonymity, I refrain from providing any detail that could be used to uncover their individual identities.

Nevertheless, some general background information about my informants' whereabouts and their current situations might be helpful to better grasp their responses in regard to the implementation of Shari'a in Aceh. All my interviewees were men, and were in their mid-30s and mid-40s. Like the majority

4 It has to be acknowledged that the exclusion of Acehnese who live, work and study in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Sudan from this scholarly inquiry is very unfortunate, as they possibly hold very distinct opinions on Shari'a implementation in their homeland when compared with their fellow countrymen based in the West.

5 Fieldwork for my PhD thesis, titled "Long-distance politics in transition: Aceh's diaspora during and after the homeland conflict (1976–2009)," was carried out between November 2006 and October 2007 in Malaysia, Aceh, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the USA. I revisited Aceh and Malaysia in 2008 and again in 2009.

of Acehnese diasporans they would generally not be considered elites, hailing from the lower to middle socio-economic strata of society instead. Most of them had enjoyed basic religious education in a *dayah* (religious school) while receiving primary education and had also finished high school. Some had attended university for some time, but often had not graduated due to the worsening conflict back home. Before leaving for Europe or Australia, many had spent several years living in Malaysia. At the time of the interviews, most were working in blue-collar jobs, some were furthering their education and some were unemployed, in some cases already for more than two years. Especially since the economic recession hit Europe in 2008, they found it difficult to find new jobs. Unemployment was generally experienced as a burdensome circumstance, often accompanied with intensive homesickness and frustration. Having a lot of free time, however, also enabled some of them to become more active on behalf of their diasporic organisations, as demonstrated by their increasing involvement in cultural activities and traditional celebrations as well as their participation in political discussions in online forums.

With regard to their political alignments, none of my informants had fought for GAM in Aceh during the conflict, even though some had sympathised with or were even loosely aligned with GAM. In general, they became more attracted to GAM while they were already abroad and some even assisted GAM leaders as contact persons. Whereas their political commitments during the time of the conflict were rather clear, over the post-conflict years these informants developed more nuanced political standings. In particular, they became more critical of former GAM leaders, as well as GAM's political successor, the Aceh Party (Partai Aceh/PA). In general, while many of them expressed public support for the peace process, in private some continue to hold aspirations for an independent Aceh.

Religiosity in the Acehnese Diaspora

Although the study of global diasporas has grown exponentially over the last decades, so far only a few scholars have focused on the links between diaspora and religion (Baumann 2004; Sökefeld 2004; Vertovec 2004). If scholars of diasporas consider religion at all in their research, it is mostly in relation to various aspects of life in the host country, for example how Muslim immigrants loosen or revive their religious identities when confronted with non-Muslim majorities (e.g. Saint-Blancat 2002; Schiffauer 1999). By comparison, relatively few studies have paid attention to the impact diasporans have on religious developments in the homeland (Dean 2011). Unlike long-distance politics, nationalism,

and diasporic impacts on homeland politics, which have all served as common topics for academic inquiry (Lyons 2006; Shain 2002; Skrbíš 1999), neither the diasporic impact on religion in the homeland nor the changing perception of homeland religion among diasporans has been researched thoroughly.

Undoubtedly, Islam is an inextricable constituent of 'Acehneseness' (Lindsey et al. 2007, 216). According to the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, 98.8% of the Acehnese population is Muslim.⁶ Although Islam is not the one and only determinant, the construction of Acehnese identity encapsulates Islamic beliefs, practices, customs, and holidays (Siapno 2002). This said, Islam is also of crucial importance for the identity of Acehnese diasporans. In this, the Acehnese are by no means exceptional, as other ethnic diasporas also utilise religion to frame their identity. For example, Kristin Langellier (2010, 79) wrote about the Somalis overseas that their ethnic and "cultural authenticity is perceived to be largely coterminous with Islam." Many scholars have observed the Acehnese self-depiction as more pious compared to other Indonesian Muslims. Even non-Acehnese have adopted this self-image and tend to describe the Acehnese as "staunch Muslims" (Suryadinata 2002, 63). Proud to be one of the first entry points for Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, Acehnese even refer to their homeland as the 'Veranda of Mecca' (*Serambi Mekkah*) (Aspinall 2009; Reid 2006).

As described by Vertovec (2004, 282), "[u]pon settling in a new environment, immigrants often soon set about collectively organizing themselves for purposes of religious worship. The formation of associations is one prominent kind of socio-religious organization." This is also true for the Acehnese in diaspora: They not only transferred their ethno-religious heritage to the new countries of residence but also started to set up religious and other meeting points, thereby reconstituting "cultural patterns and social relations in new settings" (Vertovec 2004, 282). For Acehnese migrating to Malaysia, the shifts and adaptations in regard to language, custom, culture, dress and religion were relatively minor, as Acehnese and Malays share many cultural traits. Hence Acehnese have been able to blend into Malay(sian) society without much trouble. In the past, specific Acehnese mosques were erected; however, these are now generally open to Muslims of any ethnic background.⁷ Today, many Acehnese also

6 Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, "Population by Religion, 2009." <http://www.kemenag.go.id/file/dokumen/PeddkAgamaogh1.pdf> (Accessed 6 December 2011).

7 Some older Malaysians of Acehnese descent from the area of Yan, also known as Kampung Aceh, claimed that building a *meunasah* (prayer hall, which also serves as a sleeping place for unmarried men) was one of the first things that needed to be organized after a group of Acehnese decided to settle down outside their original area. In fact, the Acehnese who came

attend mosques for the general Muslim population that are not marked in any specific way as being ‘Acehnese’ mosques.

For Acehnese diasporans in the West, however, bringing and nurturing their Acehneseness (*keAcehan*)—including their Islamic identity—was often a more conscious decision. Getting precise definitions from my informants of what actually constituted Acehneseness was difficult, since many thought of Acehneseness as self-evident. Nevertheless, whereas Acehnese in Aceh tend to understand their Acehneseness in Indonesia as, primarily, an incompatibility with what they consider ‘mainstream Indonesianness,’ it means something different in the diaspora. Perhaps, to offer a very basic definition, Acehneseness overseas could be understood as the feeling of belonging to an ethno-religious ‘imagined community’ based on shared symbols of language, culture, and religious traditions that are preserved and often re-imagined by diasporans living far away from the homeland. As Martin Baumann (2000, 327) has observed for diasporas generally: “[m]ore often than not it [i.e. the cultural-religious point of reference] involves an identificational difference of the diaspora group in contrast with the society’s dominant cultural and religious norms and orientations.”

Coming from a developing country and moving to a Western host country often created feelings of ‘strangeness’ and difficulties in adjusting to mainstream mundaneness and common lifestyles, which in turn could then trigger a stronger urge to reorient oneself towards one’s ethno-cultural roots and one’s traditional religious affiliation. In the words of a former informant, “since I am here [in Denmark], I am more Acehnese than back home, [back in Aceh] I used to speak more Indonesian, now my Acehnese is better and I also pray more regularly” (quoted in Missbach 2011a, 155). With regard to his increased observance of Islamic ritual practice, this Acehnese man was no exception, as other scholars have observed that “paradoxically, migration to the lands of unbelievers strengthens the religious commitment of the migrants” (van der Veer, quoted in Baumann 2004, 172).

In this particular case, it was obvious that increased religious commitment was also understood to be equivalent with a self-perception of being more Acehnese. Self-assurance about religious and ethnic identity *vis-à-vis* the host country majority is not only an internal matter within the Acehnese diaspora. From my observations, I gained the impression that Acehnese in Western countries often felt the necessity to prove to their friends and families back in

to Yan in the course of the Dutch-Acehnese War at the end of the nineteenth century built a *meunasah* that can still be visited today.

Aceh that they could still be good Muslims and, therefore, be proper Acehnese even when living among non-believers. In order to assure their fellow country people in Aceh and in other host countries of their continuing commitment to Islam as part of their bona fides of 'Acehnese-ness,' Acehnese diasporans often send reports about their religious celebrations to Acehnese journals and tabloids and also circulate photographs of religious gatherings in email lists and online forums. A rather typical report (taken from the '*Aceh Goet*' list-serv, dated November 25, 2011) reads as follows:

ACEH GOET—Denmark: We celebrate Aidul Adha in a sports building
Celebrating religious holidays is a religious habit that has to be followed by every Muslim, whether living in the country of birth or abroad. We are part of the Acehnese overseas who live far away from their homeland, but nonetheless we still celebrate the religious holidays with what we have.

Defending themselves against both silent and public reproaches from the homeland, one of the diasporans explained to me:

It is not true that the Acehnese lost their identity when living in an infidel country (*negeri kafir*). Quite the opposite, the feeling of Acehnese-ness (*rasa keacehan*) grew stronger when living in places like Sweden. There is considerable evidence, for example, of Acehnese in Sweden writing fluently in Acehnese. Yes, it is true there are also those who have lost their Acehnese-ness here in Sweden, but they are not many.

Quoted in MISSBACH 2011a, 154

While living in diaspora, Acehnese try to maintain their language and traditions, including Acehnese Islamic religious rituals for all kinds of rites of passage (circumcisions for young males, weddings, funerals) and Islamic holidays (*Idul Fitri*, *Idul Adha*, *Maulid*). Whereas, for example, Islamic holidays in Denmark are celebrated in rented communal halls, schools or private houses, the Acehnese in Sweden gather in their own prayer hall-cum-community centre (*Ac. meunasah*) in Fittja (on the outskirts of Stockholm).⁸ This *meunasah* is

8 Referring again to the aforementioned residential arrangements, it is not coincidental that there is a *meunasah* in Stockholm because most Acehnese in Sweden live on the outskirts of Stockholm. Whereas in Denmark, which hosts roughly the same number of Acehnese, there is no *meunasah* (yet) because the Acehnese diasporans are more dispersed across rural areas of the country.

open to everyone and, besides functioning as a prayer house, it is used for all kinds of religious, social, political and cultural events. It is used by Acehnese women for cooking and sewing, but also for Swedish and Acehnese language instruction courses and Qur'an reading sessions (Ali 2008). In particular, the religious education of the second generation, i.e. children born in Sweden, is seen as a high priority in order to familiarize them with their cultural heritage and their religious identity. The reason for this—as has been observed for other diasporas—is that “without a serious effort at teaching the rudiments of their respective languages, the maintenance of ethnic identity is precarious” (Safran 2008, 185).

In summary, Acehnese in the diaspora try to uphold religious practices in their everyday life as much as possible, even though this is done with many adaptations (be it the wearing of the headscarf or adjusting the daily fasting hours in the European summer). Even in host countries, such as Finland or Germany, where there are few other Acehnese diasporans, they strive to uphold their religious practices by coming together with Muslim immigrants of other ethnicities (including Muslims from Somalia, Iraq or Turkey) to observe major religious holidays. This is especially the case during the fasting month, Ramadan. Indeed, many Acehnese in the diaspora see themselves as ‘good Muslims.’ Their main concerns are to uphold their religious and ethnic identities—which are closely aligned in most imaginations of ‘Acehneseness.’ They promote their beliefs and even more so their cultural traditions (dance performances, food exhibitions and trade fairs) in public, while at the same time operating within the political limits of life in their host countries.⁹ Based on my observations, they show no interest in radical Islamic or pan-Islamic movements, either within the host countries or back home in Aceh. Since I started my research on the Acehnese diaspora five years ago, I have never come across any explicit demand for the implementation of Shari‘a as a concern of high priority, either in conversations I had or in the diasporic online forums or reports.

9 See for example “Saman Dan Boh Rom-Rom Aceh di Panggung Global Fair Denmark,” Press Release, 5 May 2010, <http://www.waa-aceh.org/2010/05/saman-dan-boh-rom-rom-aceh-di-panggung-global-fair-denmark/> (Accessed 8 December 2011) and “Tarian Aceh Gemparkan Penyambutan Kemerdekaan Norwegia ke 196 tahun,” Press Release, 18 May 2010, <http://www.waa-aceh.org/2010/05/tarian-aceh-gemparkan-penyambutan-kemerdekaan-norwegia-ke-196-tahun/> (Accessed 8 December 2011).

Why Diasporans Criticise Shari'a Implementation in Aceh

In August 2011, I visited an Acehnese *ustadz* (religious teacher), who had been living in diaspora for more than ten years, to ask him about his views on Shari'a implementation in Aceh. From previous encounters, I knew that he was enthusiastically involved in a local Qur'an school to teach children (from diverse ethnic backgrounds) to read the Arabic text of Islamic scripture. He is a strong proponent of practicing Shari'a, and has even written a PhD thesis on the matter. Unlike all my other interlocutors, he was wearing a *kaftan* (a 'Middle Eastern looking,' rather than traditionally Acehnese kind of Muslim dress) when I visited him in his house. Within the Acehnese community, but also in the wider Indonesian immigrant communities and even beyond, he enjoys a high degree of respectability. Yet, his interpretation of the social and political impact of Shari'a implementation in Aceh, particularly with regard to the future, left me rather astonished. Unlike the moderate criticism I expected, he expressed rigorous criticism of the implementation of Shari'a, and outright rejection of the way in which this law is supposed to operate in Aceh. Although he was obviously strongly committed to Islam and Shari'a as defining standards of personal piety, his basic argument resembled to a large extent the objections raised against the imposition of Shari'a by the more secular-minded GAM leaders in the diaspora, which I had come across many times before, and which has been referred to by other scholars as well (Schulze 2004; Aspinall 2009).¹⁰ Paraphrasing his key argument gives a good impression of his views on this:

Shari'a is exercised only because of Jakarta's permission. The Indonesian government gave it to the Acehnese people, but made sure to keep the reins in its hands. Just like the Law of Special Autonomy for Aceh is a camouflage, the general political system in Aceh has also not changed much. Jakarta keeps cheating Aceh. How would it otherwise be possible that the Acehnese people remain poor, whereas the corrupt state officials wander off unpunished?

This statement combines a number of crucial tenets in the arguments upheld by diasporan Acehnese against the implementation of Shari'a in Aceh, of which

10 For direct statements by GAM 'Prime Minister' Malik Mahmud, see, for example, "Ex-rebel leader slams Islamic law in Aceh," Reuters, 14 August 2006; "Syariat Islam Bukan Keinginan Rakyat Aceh," 14 August 2006, <http://www.tempointeraktif.com/hg/nasional/2006/08/14/brk,20060814-81900,id.html> (Accessed 13 October 2010).

I will discuss the most significant ones: 1) an unwanted gift from Jakarta; 2) that God's law should not be subordinated to the control of a the state; 3) that the Shari'a regulations are unfairly applied; 4) that the Shari'a legislation prioritizes a limited set of devotional and moral issues over broader social concerns; and 5) the fragility of Aceh's post-conflict society.

The Unwanted Gift

Despite practicing Islam and being pious Muslims who might—in theory—favour the idea of Shari'a, Acehnese diasporans generally disapproved of the state implementation of Islamic law in Aceh, denouncing it as an “unwanted gift” from Jakarta. My respondents unanimously asserted that former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid offered Aceh the chance to implement Shari'a law in Aceh only to divert attention away from the actual causes of the conflict. Whereas Hasan Tiro and his followers rebelled because of what they understood to be economic exploitation and political paternalism, many Acehnese joined GAM because of the military oppression that governed their daily lives in Aceh. After many years of conflict, people in Aceh yearned for peace. One way to end the conflict without further bloodshed would have been to arrange a referendum for independence similar to the one held in East Timor in August 1999. While Wahid temporarily entertained such a possibility (Aspinall 2009), eventually he arrived at the opinion that Indonesia could not afford to lose another province, especially not one that contributed significantly to the national state budget through its rich reserves in oil and gas.

Many in the Acehnese diaspora maintain that President Wahid made the offer of Shari'a as a deliberately political manoeuvre, and that he was well aware of the deeper political implications it entailed. After all, the Acehnese, who are known for their Islamic piety, could not easily reject such an offer without compromising their reputation as particularly committed Muslims. It can also be assumed that Wahid purposely tried to weaken foreign-based GAM leaders, who had always been suspected by people back in Aceh of being less devout believers, by involving local Acehnese ulama in the political process (Aspinall 2009).¹¹ GAM leaders had long been able to avoid clear statements about their views on the role of Islam in the state structure of a future inde-

11 Demands for introducing Shari'a had existed in Aceh long before GAM took up its struggle for independence. It was, in fact, one of the core demands forwarded by Daud Beureueh, the local *Darul Islam* leader in Aceh (Feener, this volume).

pendent Aceh. Because of Wahid's manoeuvring, however, they were forced to speak out against the implementation of Shari'a (Aspinall 2009; ICG 2006). Afraid of losing their place of authority to local ulama by being labelled as 'bad' Muslims, some GAM-leaders tried to rebuff such defamation by stating that Islam was already fully integrated into the Acehnese identity, and that Jakarta's endorsement of Islamic law was not required for Acehnese to become better Muslims (Kingsbury 2007). Still, GAM's attitude towards Shari'a implementation remained a difficult balancing act.

Given GAM's intention to find international (and especially Western) support for their cause, playing the 'Islam card' never appeared attractive. Having Aceh portrayed as 'Islamist' by foreign media would surely diminish any hope for international solidarity. On the other hand, any explicitly secularist approach carried the risk of alienating the Acehnese people back in the homeland. When the Wahid-led government tried to redefine the conflict and, most importantly, the causes of the conflict, by fostering the impression that the Acehnese people had been striving for religious goals rather than political self-determination, this effort was tantamount to hijacking GAM's discursive supremacy over the conflict. Hence, according to my respondents, Jakarta's push for the imposition of Shari'a in Aceh was nothing more than a 'smear campaign' aimed at depicting the Acehnese as "terrorists" (*melebel orang Aceh sebagai teroris*), "discrediting Aceh in the eyes of the world" (*membangun image buruk aceh di mata internasional*) and "making [Aceh] look like a nursery for fundamentalists and Islamic militants."¹² By doing so, Aceh was put on par with "Mindanao, Pakistan, Afghanistan and other places of that kind," especially after 9/11, according to another interlocutor's retrospective analysis.

Although the armed conflict was formally brought to an end when GAM and the Indonesian government signed the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding in August 2005 (in which GAM agreed to officially renounce its demand for independence), it seems that the idea of an independent Aceh is still attractive to many Acehnese in diaspora. This is clearly reflected in the statements of many diaspora Acehnese, such as that "even though demands for independence are not in accordance with world politics today, for Aceh it will remain the main issue."¹³ In relation to the epigraph, about how Jakarta utilizes and

12 "Sepertinya Aceh identik dengan fundamentalis, militan ataupun sejenisnya." Email correspondence with the author, 28 September 2011, 30 September 2011 and 10 October 2011.

13 "Tuntutan kemerdekaan ini boleh saja tidak sesuai dengan percaturan politik dunia saat ini,

therefore controls the politics in Aceh with the help of Shari'a, another respondent from Sweden stated that "it would take a substantial amount of time for [the Acehnese] to study Shari'a" so that it could be applied for the benefit of the Acehnese people. However, "such a venture would only be successful if Aceh was truly allowed to govern itself." Quintessentially, as long as "there are still collisions with Jakarta-made laws, an equitable Shari'a remains to be utopian."¹⁴

God's Law

Tightly connected to the diasporans' contention about Jakarta's 'trick' in offering the Shari'a to the Acehnese is another argument, namely that Shari'a—understood as the law of God—should not be subordinated to a secular legislature. From the perspective that regional laws, including Aceh's Shari'a law, ought to comply with national law and especially with Pancasila, Indonesia's official state philosophy, it appears, in the words of one of my informants, that Indonesia's "man-made laws, which are just an adoption of the former colonial legislature, are above god-made laws."¹⁵ This point of criticism is related to the arguments described above, but differs in coming to the issue from a more religious perspective. The position of most diasporans on the implementation of Islamic law is complicated by their attitudes toward the Indonesian government. Many maintain a commitment to the ideal of independence, and this seems to be stronger among Acehnese in Australia and Europe than for many of those residing in Malaysia.

Exemptions

Most of my interlocutors saw the implementation of Shari'a as an instrument of control in the hands of the national government that—although supported by some Acehnese ulama—had "nothing to do with real Islamic law as it ought to be according to God." One major bone of contention concerned the many

tapi hal ini akan tetap menjadi persoalan utama Aceh." Email correspondence with the author, 30 September 2011.

14 Email correspondence with the author, 4 October 2011.

15 "Hal ini sangat paradok karena undang-undang buatan manusia (Pancasila + KUHP Indonesia adopsi dari bekas penjajah Belanda) diatas dari undang-undang buatan tuhan (syariat Islam)." Email correspondence with the author, 4 October 2011.

loopholes in the current Shari'a regulation. Even though my interlocutors did not consent with the existence of the law and regulations in the first place, they went on to criticize its unequal application. Although the Shari'a is ideally applicable equally to all Muslims, my informants criticized what they saw as clear evidence that some Muslims seemed to be more equal than others under the current state system of Shari'a in Aceh (Feener 2013b). Three informants in particular pointed out the exceptions to the enforcement of Shari'a in reality, as enjoyed by members of the military, the police and other state officials.¹⁶ One of them even went as far as to call it a "racist policy," because non-Acehnese people working and living in Aceh who do not hold an identity card listing a permanent address in Aceh are allegedly exempt from Shari'a. Moreover, my informants kept citing examples, in which violators of Shari'a law had managed to escape punishment due to their prominent position. For example, in April 2007, Puji Wijayanto, the head of the district court in Sabang was caught red-handed in a hotel with a woman who was not his wife.¹⁷ Being suspected of having transgressed Law No. 14/2003 on *khalwat* ('illicit proximity,' see Feener, this volume), if found guilty, he would have been caned between three and nine strokes and/or been forced to pay a fine of between Rp. 2,500,000 and Rp. 10,000,000 (US\$ 250 and US\$ 1,000) (Paragraph 22). Although Puji resigned from his post voluntarily, and was then transferred to the High Court in Yogyakarta (though as a non-active judge), he was not punished in accordance with the Shari'a legislation. My informants not only noted the blatant case of exceptionalism, but also argued that this exemption had strengthened their suspicion that "Shari'a was after all an anti-Acehnese affront by Jakarta," demonstrating clearly who was in charge in Aceh.

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- 16 The example provided by one informant (and not without a healthy portion of mockery) was an incident in which a young Javanese soldier who was departing from Aceh kissed his Acehnese girlfriend goodbye in front of the onlooking media. When the photograph of the kissing couple appeared in the local media, it provoked so much criticism in Aceh that the soldier's supervisor felt obliged to provide a public apology on behalf of his protégé. See: "Tentara, Asmara, dan Air Mata," Garsip, No. 46, September 26, 2005, <http://arsip.gatra.com/2005-10-02/artikel.php?id=88737> (accessed 17 October 2011).
- 17 "Berbuat Mesum: Ketua Pengadilan Negeri Kota Sabang dicopot," *tempointeraktif*, 23 May 23 2007, <http://www.tempo.co.id/hg/nusa/sumatera/2007/05/23/brk,20070523-100464.id.html> (Accessed 13 October 2011).

Limited Concerns

Closely connected to the argument about exemptions, is the more general criticism of the very limited concerns dealt with by current Shari'a regulations (Großmann, this volume). In fact, this criticism reflected similar debates among Acehnese based in Aceh (see Feener 2013b; Idria, this volume). So far, the enacted *qanun* deals primarily with "moral wrong-doings." In the words of an informant: "I see the enforcement of Shari'a in Aceh as misguided (*salah kaprah*) because it regulates only minor issues, such as gambling, adultery, and the consumption of alcohol, as well as the requirement for women to wear headscarves in public, even though Islamic law is far more wide-reaching."¹⁸ People in the diaspora generally believe that such moralistic issues are less crucial for Aceh's current political and economic developments. Instead of improving the collective morals and strengthening religious modesty, they are more concerned with issues such as social justice and coming to terms with the violent past that was very much characterized by widespread and so far unpunished human rights violations.

In the eyes of my informants, ordinary people (*rakyat kecil*) gained little from the implementation of Shari'a. According to them, the beneficiaries of the implementation of Shari'a in Aceh were not only the government in Jakarta and the local ulama who were seeking a greater share in local power, but also the local enforcers of Shari'a (the so-called 'Shari'a Police,' Wilayatul Hisbah/WH). One Acehnese interlocutor even claimed that "arresting and whipping offenders had turned into a method of generating income for the Shari'a police."¹⁹ He had heard of stories in which WH officers stole the hand-phones of the people they arrested, so he simply referred to them as "thugs."²⁰

With regard to callously chasing cases of rather minor moral offences, the WH has earned itself a very bad reputation (Otto and Otto, this volume). Especially before the budget cuts under Governor Irwandi Yusuf, the WH carried out raids that specifically targeted women on issues of Islamic dress. Additionally, there were widespread reports about nightly raids at hotels, where WH officers looked for unmarried couples. The local poor, who indulged in popular entertainment such as playing dominos, also fell prey to WH-raids, as their games fell under 'gambling activities.' Although, according to the law, the Shari'a Police are not allowed to make arrests, there have been incidents in which

18 Online correspondence with the author, 28 September 2011.

19 Online correspondence with the author, 28 September 2011.

20 Online correspondence with the author, 10 October 2011.

they have taken matters into their own hands and overstepped their authority (Cf. Otto and Otto, this volume).²¹ One interlocutor said that, "especially after the MoU, the WH, along with the judges [at the Shari'a courts], were getting crazy, as they would order people who have been caught gambling or drinking alcohol to be caned in front of other people."²² The latter is understood to be extremely humiliating and disgraceful. Some public commentators from the Acehnese diaspora even went as far as to denounce public caning as a human rights violation (Mughtar 2009). However, there are also Acehnese in the homeland who express such criticism (see Großmann, this volume). In a letter to the editor entitled "Aceh doesn't need sharia law," a man who called himself Teuku Agam (probably a *nom de guerre*, as *agam* in Acehnese means not only 'man' but also stands for the armed wing of GAM) wrote:

The public flogging of male and female sharia law offenders has greatly damaged the reputation and image of Aceh both nationally and internationally, and led to the sadistic and barbaric image of the Acehnese.

Jakarta Post, 9 February 2009

When I was discussing with my informants the question of who benefits the most from Shari'a implementation and who does not benefit at all, one of my interlocutors complained that "it was the Acehnese people themselves who were most damaged by Jakarta's version of Shari'a, because for them daily life in Aceh has become tame and limited, as they have become restricted in their daily freedoms and always have to be wary of Shari'a raids."²³ Another interlocutor criticized the law by saying that "it is only women not wearing the headscarf who have become the subject of physical punishment, whereas the big corruptors walked free."²⁴ This perceived mismanagement of priorities—at times in

21 It has to be noted that 'vigilante justice' is a problem in Aceh, not only due to the transgressions of authority by the official WH, but also community retributions take place more frequently.

22 Online correspondence with the author, 28 September 2011.

23 "Yang paling di rugikan adalah orang-orang Aceh sendiri, dengan di berlakukan syariat islam versi Jakarta, terasa sekali kehidupan ini jadi sangat di kekang dan sempit di Aceh, orang Aceh tidak bebas dan leluasa bergerak dan akan selalu was-was akan kena razia WH." Online correspondence with the author, 10 October 2011.

24 "[...] sebagai contoh, orang perempuan karena tidak menutup kepala kena hukuman, sementara koruptor bebas berkeliaran tanpa ada hukuman apapun. Apa ini namanya hukum (syariat)?" Online correspondence with the author, 30 September 2011.

which Aceh faces a variety of economic and political challenges—brings us to the last point of my informants' criticism on which I want to elaborate.

The Fragility of Aceh's Post-conflict Society

Even though the armed conflict was brought to an end six years ago, Aceh is still in the middle of a post-conflict transition, the end of which is not (yet) in sight. Given the enormous socio-political, economic and cultural changes taking place in Aceh (see Feener, Daly and Reid 2011), my informants from the diaspora argued that the time is not yet ripe for Shari'a in Aceh:

How is it possible to apply Islamic law in Aceh 'completely' (*secara sempurna*) if the war in Aceh has just finished and the society still suffers from economic instability and many other uncertainties? The central government in Jakarta has not yet fully clarified all uncertainties while Aceh remains to be cheated (*ditipu*) with regard to politics. So far, the division of power [between the central and the local government] has not been fully clarified [...] that is why Aceh remains highly susceptible to [renewed] conflict with Jakarta.²⁵

According to the diagnosis of the Acehnese in diaspora, other issues, such as justice and reconciliation between the former conflict parties, as well as proper compensation for the conflict victims, were more important than the implementation of Shari'a. However, the diasporans often took a rather gloomy view when asked how likely they judged the chances for any of that to happen any time soon. The general pessimism towards their homeland and current political developments there becomes more comprehensible when taking into consideration the general bias of their news feed (see below).

In summary, having seen the wide range of dissatisfaction and complaints, it is not surprising that my informants would like to see the temporary suspension or even the abolition of state Shari'a in Aceh. Supposedly in order to avoid suspicions or allegations of not being good Muslims, one informant put it like this: "It is not that I am totally against Shari'a for Aceh, but there are so many issues that would have to be sorted out first."²⁶ Another respondent

25 Online correspondence with the author, 18 October 2011.

26 "Saya tidak menolak [the implementation of Shari'a in Aceh] ... Maka harus disosialisasikan dulu objektif dan sasarnya." Online correspondence with the author, 26 October 2011.

recommended postponing the whole matter until the right time comes, without indicating when that time might be. The majority of my informants, however, rejected state Shari'a completely: "I think Shari'a should be abolished altogether, because the way I see it, it is doing more harm than good."²⁷ Another informant put it like this:

It is time to think about Aceh's own interests. [We have to ask ourselves whether] the implementation of Shari'a helps Aceh to prosper? If the answer is no, then this law needs to be revoked.²⁸

Despite the bluntness of some of these statements, it is important to contextualize them further. The demand for the abolition of Shari'a in Aceh is not necessarily tantamount to entirely secularized views on politics, as some of them pointed to Brunei and Malaysia as positive models worth replicating if Aceh could become an independent and developed state. It is probably safe to say that my informants did not wish to disengage religion from politics entirely, for—when asked more specifically—they still upheld the need for Islamic courts to regulate matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, as is the case all over Indonesia.²⁹

Of course, it needs to be emphasized that all these statements were made in private. The protected interview situation might have led some informants to express their views more bluntly. Although most of my interlocutors stated that Shari'a was not as important to them as many other topics relating to current homeland politics, and therefore was discussed only rarely in public online forums, it still seems worthwhile to identify some reasons why the Acehnese diasporans took such positions in the first place. Taking into account their socio-political backgrounds, as well as their situatedness in diaspora helps to shed light on the formation of such collective stances.

27 "Saya pikir sebaiknya di hapuskan saja, karena saya melihat syariat islam di Aceh lebih banyak kerugiannya dari pada mamfaatnya." Online correspondence with the author, 10 October 2011.

28 "Jadi sudah saatnya aceh berfikir untuk kepentingannya juga. Dapatkah implementasi syariat islam memakmurkan aceh? Apabila jawabannya 'tidak,' maka hukum itu perlu dicabut." Online correspondence with the author, 30 September 2011.

29 "Masalah kekeluargaan seperti perceraian, konflik perkawinan/pernikahan, saya kira pengadilan agama lebih cocok menanganinya." Online correspondence with author, 26 July 2013.

Interpreting Opposition to the Shari'a

As mentioned earlier, the majority of diasporans had left Aceh before Shari'a was formally implemented. The fact that they had not experienced the state Shari'a system personally has important implications for understanding their opinion. My informants in Malaysia could rely on word-of-mouth accounts of the situation back home, as passed on by the large numbers of newcomers arriving from Aceh during the peak of the conflict—which happened to coincide with the introduction of the by-laws 12/2003, 13/2003 and 14/2003, and pre-dated the 2004 tsunami. In contrast, within the diaspora in the West, people relied firstly and foremostly on online media to gain information about the way Shari'a was implemented in Aceh. Given the biased nature of both online media reporting and word-of-mouth communication, in general Acehnese diasporans only learned about the most contentious aspects of Shari'a implementation, such as the raids of the WH to check women's clothing (*razia jilbab*), public canings and misconduct of WH members.

Looking for sensational news, online and print media often published reports about offenses against Shari'a, such as gambling or inappropriate sexual conduct, on the front page and at prominent spots on their websites, so that it was generally hard to ignore them. Online newspapers hardly ever quoted, for example, the exact verdict of the Shari'a court, so readers only learned about the penalty, and not the reasoning behind it. Although diasporans called and chatted with friends and family in Aceh more or less regularly, apparently this first-hand input could not help to adjust these biased impressions. Most likely, within such private conversations Shari'a law does not play a big role in the first place. Therefore, it is not surprising that Acehnese in diaspora tended to view news about the implementation of Islamic law, and the apparent discrepancies between an abstract conception of Shari'a and its formal application by the state implementation, more critically than people living in Aceh.

Although Acehnese in the diaspora still engaged intensively with the homeland, the interaction between them and the homeland had turned into one-way communication after the end of the conflict (Missbach 2011a). Generally, Acehnese in diaspora were not included in discussions about politics, let alone consulted by the relevant law-making bodies in the homeland dealing with such delicate questions as additional provisions or revisions to the Shari'a. Hence, the influence of the Acehnese overseas on upcoming legal changes and adjustments of the Shari'a by-laws in Aceh can be expected to remain minimal. For reasons that are not always entirely clear, the Acehnese in diaspora have not appealed to the responsible authorities in the homeland as being adequate

dialogue partners.³⁰ It can be assumed that the local government's acceptance of the political arrangements of Aceh within the Indonesian state have further reinforced the gap between the community leaders in the diaspora and the political leadership in Aceh. Given these wider tensions and issues of trust between the local authorities in Aceh and the diaspora, the latter hardly qualify as desirable consultants.

Moreover, unlike with more purely political matters, be it rejecting the plans to split the province of Aceh or continuing to demand the formation of a truth and reconciliation commission, the Acehnese diasporans have kept rather silent with regard to religious affairs. In addition, I have noticed that, in online discussion groups and email lists used by diasporans, Shari'a is not a prominent subject matter. The primary trigger for the diasporization of the Acehnese overseas was the homeland conflict. Thus, their communal priorities were clear: homeland politics mattered more than religious issues. Unlike the great numbers of public statements (press statements, petitions, online newsletters and demonstrations) that focused on political issues in the homeland (for more specific examples, see Missbach 2011b), hardly any public statements on Shari'a were forwarded by the diasporans, except for very few radio interviews. How can this be explained?

Despite the assumption that Acehnese in the diaspora enjoy greater freedom of speech as compared to their fellow Acehnese in Aceh, who might face more immediate social control when making public statements, all of my informants indicated that I should anonymize them when quoting their opinion on Shari'a. Even far away from home, they were anxious of being denigrated or having their piety questioned. Anxiety was expressed as a fear of physical and psychological assault. For example, one informant stated that "[i]f I declared [in public] that Shari'a in Aceh is not important, in Aceh I would be completely destroyed (*diganyang*)."³¹ For such reasons, all of my informants made clear at the beginning of our conversations that they were giving me their "personal opinion." In addition, during our conversations, they hardly generalised their views to be valid for other diasporans as well. However, once I had assured them I would protect their identities as well as I could, they appeared eager to speak their minds.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that my interviews offered a space for my interlocutors to articulate their frustration which they might not have

30 This even included an Acehnese diasporan who had written a PhD thesis on the just implementation of Shari'a. He was never consulted by the bodies responsible for drafting local by-laws.

31 Online correspondence with the author, 30 September 2011.

had been able to express elsewhere. Instead, it is more useful to reflect more on the context of the interviews, and especially on the so-called ‘social desirability bias.’ Rephrasing Kristin Langellier (2010, 67), I should ask: how actively were my informants trying to ‘read’ me (and my unspoken expectations) in just the same way as I was trying to ‘read’ them? I should also ask to what extent they might have adjusted their answers to the “regulating discourses of Islam and the West” (ibid.). Of course, it is extremely difficult to evaluate whether I—white, female, middle-class, presumably non-Muslim—might have unconsciously evoked the answers that I was given, or might have influenced their way of framing these, and the views I presented above must thus be read against this foil.

Conclusions

Although independence for Aceh currently seems to be entirely out of the question as a political alternative, and the peace agreement has been hailed as a great success by the Indonesian government, GAM, and the international community, a number of Acehnese in diaspora still hold on to the idea. This chapter has demonstrated that one way in which the diasporans foster their demand for self-determination is by (re)framing their protest against Aceh’s membership of the Indonesian unitary state in terms of a rejection of state Shari’a. By arguing that Shari’a is not what the people in Aceh require to improve their welfare and general living conditions, they tend to see Shari’a solely as an “unwanted gift from Jakarta.” The crux of this argument is that Shari’a has become the next political instrument in the hands of the national government used to ‘interfere’ in Aceh’s internal affairs, namely by having the last say on what does and what does not fall within the range of Islamic law.

A common thread throughout many of my conversations with my informants was that “Islam is already strongly established as an integral part of the Acehnese society” (*Islam sudah melekat dengan orang Aceh, sudah sangat sehati dengan masyarakat*) and that therefore no additional Islamization from above is required (Muchtar 2009). My interlocutors’ view of their own religiosity as superior, in comparison specifically with the Jakarta politicians and also with others (commonly condensed under the slightly negatively connoted term “*orang Java*,” which basically refers to all non-Acehnese Indonesians), strengthened their resistance against what they saw as external political intervention in local affairs. For them, the implementation of Shari’a in Aceh was a mere political instrument used by the national government, which was, however, packaged in religious rhetoric. Unmasking the religiosity of the Shari’a

discourse and instead reframing the issue in entirely political terms, allowed the diasporans to uphold their demands for political independence. Alternatively, as one diasporan put it: "the implementation of Shari'a carries many political considerations that constitute a deception of the public."³²

Having recapitulated the main stance represented in my interview material, it has become apparent that Acehnese in the diaspora often neglect actual developments of the implementation of Shari'a and local discourses on it within Aceh, but nevertheless inherit strong opinions about it. It is clear, moreover, that by focusing solely on the Jakarta-Aceh relationship and thereby ignoring all the other provinces in Indonesia that also had Shari'a-derived public morality by-laws (*perda*) implemented or demanded the implementation of Shari'a, the diasporans seem to reflect a general unawareness or even ignorance of developments in other Indonesian regions. By ignoring or excluding trans-Indonesian trends, the diasporic Acehnese perpetuate the view of Aceh's religious uniqueness and political exceptionality (*Sebab amalan Islam di Aceh sangat berlainan dengan Islam di dunia lain*).³³ However, with Shari'a-inspired by-laws now also on the books in a number of other parts of Indonesia, the significance of Aceh's 'specialness' might be seen as somewhat compromised.

What strikes me most in all the conversations I had is the deliberate avoidance of the fact that it was an Acehnese provincial government, which drafted and established the institutions tasked with the implementation of Islamic law in the province (see Feener 2013a). My informants scarcely seemed to take notice of the fact that the legal drafting bodies consisted of Acehnese intelligentsia, who thus helped to shape the laws as they currently are (see Großmann, this volume). When inquiring about such involvement, my informants generally discounted those ulama and academic scholars either as "fanatics" craving for more power in local politics or as Jakarta's "lackeys" (*kaki tangan*) depriving their own people of independence.³⁴ While dreaming the dream of an independent Acehnese state, the formation of which the diasporans have now re-imagined to take place in the distant future, the Acehnese in diaspora can envision a perfect state, in which the Acehnese people (maybe even in alliance with their fellow Acehnese from abroad) might or might not decide to implement Shari'a. However, and so the often-repeated argument goes, as

32 "Tapi ia melihat pelaksanaan syariat sekarang ini penuh nuansa politik yang merupakan pembohongan publik belaka." (Muchtar 2009).

33 Online correspondence with the author, 26 October 2011.

34 Online correspondence with the author, 4 October 2011.

long as Jakarta has a say in Aceh, Shari'a will be seen as the extended arm of the Indonesian government and—even if reformed and amended—Shari'a à la Jakarta can never be quite right.

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