Margaret Kartomi

The development of the Acehnese sitting song-dances and frame-drum genres as part of religious conversion and continuing piety

This article aims to connect two important genres of Aceh’s performing arts with a broad social movement known as dakwah, meaning the early outreach and conversion to Islam and the continuing call to believers to deepen their faith and piety.\(^1\) I argue that the origin and development of the sitting (duek) song-dances (performed in the prostrated sitting position of Muslim prayer) and the frame-drum genres were motivated by dakwah and fostered by the tarèkat (Sufi brotherhoods) and the Sufi movement generally. Song-dances performed in the prostrated sitting (actually kneeling) position (see Figure 1) are to be distinguished from song-dances in standing (dong) position, discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this article.\(^2\)

\(^1\) An early version of this article was presented at the workshop titled ‘Studying Islam in Southeast Asia; State of the Art and New Approaches’ on 7-8 July 2008 at Leiden University under the auspices of the Australia-Netherlands Research Collaboration in cooperation with the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World. I am grateful to the many artists and government administrators in Aceh who allowed us to record performances and who assisted and informed Mas Kartomi and me on our field trips in Aceh in 1982 and annually from 2003 to 2007, and to the Australian Research Council for grants to carry out the research, and to Bronia Kornhauser for critically reading the article. Special thanks to the late Teuku Tjut Mohamad Hoessin of Oedjong Kalak, Koetapadang, Meulaboh (born c. 1908), who described the practices of the performing arts in his childhood and what he learned from his teachers, and to the choreographer Ibu Cut Asiah (born c. 1934), who told us of her experiences in developing the performing arts and those of her teachers and forebears who remembered the arts during the colonial era. The field recordings are held in the Sumatra Music Archive of the School of Music Conservatorium, Monash University.

\(^2\) Performances of the non-Muslim standing dance, seudati, were once preceded by a ratèb duek performance in sitting position (see the account and photos of standing seudati dancers and...
origins and development of the sitting song-dance and frame-drums genres, it is necessary to examine a body of discourse about the liturgy and the arts by Acehnese artists, researchers and religious leaders, and to look at the history of **dakwah** in Aceh, focusing on a few of the Arab, Persian, Indian and Acehnese saints who contributed to the early development of Islam there.

In their discourse about Acehnese music, dance and religious belief, three teams of Acehnese researchers and artists in the 1980s and 1990s distinguished between two aliran (Ind.), or ‘streams’ [of thought about the past]. They are the pre-Islamic (**yoh golom Islami**) and the Islamic stream (**aliran sitting** ratêb in Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:231, 224, 226).

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3 Members of these research teams employed by the Department of Education and Culture were (i) Isjkarim (chair), Drs Athaillah, Drs Muchtar Djalal, Mahmud Tammat, Siti Asrah, Hasanuddin Daud, Rosnah, Yusnani Nazar, Faridah Eriany and Suhaina (1980-81); (ii) Firdaus Burhan and Idris ZZ, Drs Abd. Hadjad, Mursalan Ardy, Mahmud Tammat, Isjkarim and Bahrulwalidin (1986-87) and (iii) Drs Z.H. Idris, Drs Abd. Hadjad, Idris ZZ and Drs Alamsyah (1993).
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Islam) or era (masa Islam). Thus, Isjkarim and his co-authors wrote about the ‘aliran of spirit veneration4 (Isjkarim et al. 1980-81:94) that was linked to the ‘Hindu culture brought to Aceh by Indian traders and migrants5, and about the second aliran that developed ‘when the Acehnese people were convinced that they should accept the teachings of Islam’6 (Isjkarim et al. 1980-81:4), beginning around the thirteenth century and becoming widespread after the sixteenth. They identify some standing dances, for example seudati, as having originated in the pre-Islamic stream: ‘they are thought to have existed from the era of the pre-Islamic kingdoms in Aceh and to have originated in Hindu culture’7 (Isjkarim et al. 1980-81:57). On the other hand, as Isjkarim and colleagues write (Isjkarim et al. 1980-81:191), genres with religious texts such as the sitting dance ratéb meuseukat may have originated in the Middle East and have been introduced in Aceh by traders from the Arabian Peninsula, Turkey, or elsewhere during the era of the Acehnese kingdoms (masa kerajaan). Yet meuseukat’s group body percussion (described below, see Figure 2) is much more complex than the simple clapping or finger snapping in comparable Middle Eastern forms.

From the 1980s, artistic genres using song lyrics on Muslim themes have been described approvingly in the literature on the arts as kesenian Islami (‘Islamic arts’),8 while those that are more closely linked with Aceh’s syncretic animist and Hindu-Buddhist past than with Islam are described either as sumbang (‘wrong, off-track’) (Isjkarim et al. 1980-81:94) or, if Muslim phrases are added at the beginning and at various points during the performances, as being acceptable forms of ‘art with an Islamic flavour’ (kesenian yang bernafaskan Islam). Thus, Isjkarim and his team of ‘traditionalist’ Muslim authors express a preference for arts of the Islamic stream, dismissing the pre-Islamic

4 [A]liran kepercayaan dan pengaruh jiwa. The Acehnese term for ‘nature spirit veneration’ is hyang diseuma, and for ‘ancestral veneration’ it is nèk muyang diseumah (Aboe Bakar et al. 2001).
5 [K]ebudayaan Hindu yang dibawa oleh para pedagang dan pengembara dari India.
6 [K]eyakinan ajaran Islam dikalangan rakyat.
7 [D]iperkiran permainan ini telah ada sejak zaman Kerajaan-Aceh dan berasal dari Kebudayaan Hindu.
8 The kesenian Islami genres have certain attributes of two of the main aliran of Islam that developed in Aceh: the Shafi’i madzhab school of jurisprudence on the one hand, and a syncretic form of Islam having Muslim Sufi and pre-Islamic elements that has persisted in some coastal, inland and mountainous areas on the other. Aceh’s Muslim-associated sitting song-dances belong mainly to the last category. Artistic survivals of a third aliran, Shi’ism, which was practised by some groups along Aceh’s west coast from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, is the tabut festival (Kartomi 1986). The brilliant sound of chest beating that typifies male seudati dancing may derive from the practice of grief-stricken breast beating at royal funerals in eighteenth-century Aceh, given that the Shi’a sect operated peripherally along Aceh’s west coast from around the 1810s until the mid-twentieth century. The early eighteenth-century Acehnese epic Hikayat Pocut Muhamat describes Shi’a-style breast beating by mourners circumambulating a corpse at a royal Acehnese funeral, where ‘pounding of the breasts’ is expressed as leumpah dada (Drewes 1979:245).
stream as being too mistik (‘mystical’), citing as an example the ulak (‘water flowing backwards dance’) genre, which is danced after a shaman makes offerings to the spirits (Isjkarim et al. 1980-81:104). Yet these same authors express approval of the ula-ula lembing (‘weaving snake’) dance, despite its clear pre-Islamic origins, noting that phrases such as La Ila La Ilallah (‘There is no God but God’), Alhamdulillah pujo keu tuhan (‘Praise be to Allah’) and Assalamualaikum (‘Peace be with you’) are normally added in performances (Isjkarim et al. 1980-81:94-6). They also describe and have lent support to the secular arts, including kreasi baru (‘new creations’) that are based on traditional or popular music and dance styles, such as the tari Arab (‘Arab dance’), which is briefly described below.

Opinions about the arts vary widely among Acehnese religious thinkers, who divide broadly into the ‘modernists’ and the ‘traditionalists’. The modernists adhere to a literal interpretation of scripture, approve only of the ‘Islamic arts’, and prefer that rituals be performed without their local, unorthodox components (Amirullah 2006:2), while the traditionalists tend to enjoy not only ‘Islamic arts’ but also ‘arts with a Muslim flavour’, ‘mystical’
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arts, and the secular performing arts, and they find ways to resolve the religious ambiguities while maintaining local religious ideas and artistic genres and their variants.

Both modernists and traditionalists are fiercely proud of Aceh's Muslim identity. As the last Southeast Asian port of call for pilgrimages to the holy land, Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam has been known for centuries as Serambi Mekah ('The Porch of Mecca') and as a centre of Islamic knowledge. Moreover, present-day north-coastal Aceh is the site of the earliest Muslim kingdoms in Southeast Asia – Pereulak and the twin kingdoms of Samudra and Pasai (Pasé, Acehnese), dating from the 1290s, followed by the golden era of the Acehnese-Malay sultanate (located in present-day Banda Aceh) from the early seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century and a less powerful era between 1750 and 1903, during which the sultan shared his power with that of aristocratic military leaders (ulëëbalang) and religious leaders (teungku, ulama), until the sultanate itself was destroyed by the Dutch (Reid 2005:5-14).

After the demise of the ulëëbalang class in 1945-46, the 'modernist' Muslim leaders increased their influence in Acehnese affairs, including the arts. Though the precise details of the methods of Muslim proselytizing have been lost over time, many Acehnese artists and writers hold that adherence to Islam initially spread throughout Aceh by way of travelling and resident religious leaders who not only gave sermons, taught people how to pray

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9 The term Serambi Mekah was used in the court chronicle Bustanu’s-Salatin (dated 1649) by Nuruddin ar-Raniri, where he wrote: ‘Sa-sungguh-nya-lah negeri Acheh Daru’s-Salam ini serambi Mekah Allah, yang mahamulia’ (Really Aceh Darussalam is the porch of Mecca [of] Allah, who is great) (Nuru’d-din ar Raniri 1966:68).

10 Dakwah (Islamic outreach) has been an important concept in the historical propagation of Islamic belief and religious tradition and in current pious practices throughout most parts of Indonesia. Since the 1970s, it has also served as a focus of Islamist, nationalist and developmentalist programs (Gade 2004:20).

11 Conversion in north-coastal Aceh dates from the late thirteenth century, as evidenced by the gravestone of Sultan Malik as-Saleh of Samudra, dated 1297 CE. From the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries, a Sufi stream of Shafi’i Islam that bordered on the heterodox was practised in some other coastal trading areas (Ricklefs 1981:3-4, 7-8, 11-2). The mystical Sufi stream of Islam, which could incorporate a number of pre-Islamic beliefs, flourished in Aceh in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, giving rise to the suggestion that Sufism was the vehicle by which Islamic conversion occurred (Johns 1975:46-9). In support of this view, Johns cites Acehnese scholar Abd al-Ra’uf’s writings and his establishment of the Shattariyah brotherhood on his return to Aceh from Arabia in 1661.

12 Among the Acehnese researchers of the performing arts who adhere to this view are Iskarim et al. (1980-81), Burhan and Idris (1986-87), and artists such as Marzuki Hassan (personal communication, 2003). The ethnographer of colonial Aceh from the 1890s on, Snouck Hurgronje (1906), also distinguished between the Muslim-linked performing arts, including ratèb, saman and other devotional practices that are performed with frame drums or body percussion (though he did not use this term), and the non-Muslim musical arts such as the hareubab (bowed string) ensemble.
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and drilled people in the recitation of the Qur’an, but also promoted the growth of the Sufi brotherhoods (Ac. tarèkat, Ar. tariqa) and thereby introduced the physical and mental devotional exercises or chants (ratèb, diké [Ar. dhikr], liké)\(^{13}\) to inculcate aspects of the liturgy among believers. Local religious teachers across Aceh then passed on the Qur’an-reading and related liturgical skills from generation to generation, especially in the dayah (Muslim boarding schools, see Figure 3). All the Sufi brotherhoods valued good conduct, tended to prescribe how their devotees should pray and perform the liturgy, and aimed to cultivate the soul’s relationship with the divine through singing and frame-drum playing, the only musical instrument of which the Prophet is said to have approved.\(^{14}\) Several Sufi brotherhoods became very popular in

\(^{13}\) Acehnese ratèb (Ar.: ratib) (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:217) bears little resemblance to the Middle Eastern ratib (Amir 2006:192).

\(^{14}\) Doubleday 1999:109-12. It is reported in one of the hadith (oral traditions related to the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions) that in Muhammad’s lifetime frame drums were played with singing to encourage warriors before battle, and that the Prophet favoured women playing frame drums at weddings, and probably other festivals as

Figure 3. An Acehnese teacher of Qur’an recitation with his pupils in an Islamic boarding school (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:2)
Aceh during the twentieth century, especially the Naqsyabandiyah.15

Aceh’s most important standing dance – seudati16 – and the Muslim and non-Muslim epic (hikayat, haba dang deuria) singing, both of which normally include partly improvised vocal lyrics, may also have been used long ago to spread the Muslim message, but Acehnese writers regard those genres as having pre-Islamic origins and associations (Isjkarim et al. 1980-81:57, 220-2). Present-day modernist ulama do not approve of these art forms, even if they are performed in a building with separate seating areas for men and women (Amirullah 2006:2). The gender-segregated dances that are performed in the prostrated sitting position of Islamic prayer, on the other hand, have a special claim to dakwah origin and status, as do the frame-drum-accompanied genres with sung Muslim texts. Many Acehnese ulama whom I have met gave their full approval to the frame drum (rapa’i) on religious grounds.

Aceh is rich in Muslim liturgical practices, as well as in performing-art genres that arguably developed from those practices. Over at least the past century, and presumably much earlier, members of Sufi brotherhoods in the villages have assembled in the meunasah (communal men’s house) or the village head’s home on Thursdays after ‘isya prayers to sing religious lyrics (ratéb, diké, liké) well into the night (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:247-57), as well as on religious holidays and at weddings, circumcisions and funerals. Such devotees took up the ‘half-sitting, half-kneeling position assumed by a Moslem worshipper after a prostration in the performance of ritual prayers (sembahyang)’ (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:223). Snouck Hurgronje (1906, II:219) also mentions

well (Doubleday 1999:109-12). In 2009, the Musyawarah Ulama Kabupaten Aceh Utara dan Kota Lhokseumawe (North Acehnese and Lhokseumawe Ulamas’ Conference 2009:1) registered its approval of the Islamic arts of rapa’i, dabus, gambus (an Arab ud-like string instrument), rebana (a large frame drum) and silat (the art of self defence).

15 Van Bruinessen 1992. See Van Bruinessen 1992 for a comprehensive account of the Naqsyabandiyah brotherhood in Indonesia, which began about 250 years ago. Though it had only a small presence in Aceh in the mid-nineteenth century, it is the main Sufi brotherhood in Aceh today, being especially strong in the west and south (Van Bruinessen 1992:144). When a charismatic leader, Muda Wali, returned from his studies in Minangkabau to Aceh in the 1940s and founded his dayah (Acehnese Islamic boarding school) in Labuhan Haji, he emphasized the importance of diké (dhikr). After he died in 1961, his son, Muhibuddin, carried on his work and spread the brotherhood’s activities throughout the province and beyond. Diké gatherings were commonly held in the dayah in Labuhan Haji and Khluet Utara, usually lasting for one or several days. The number of pupils who came to learn and meditate increased greatly, especially women and elderly men; indeed suluk became inseparable from south and southeast Aceh’s local religious culture, unlike in northern Aceh, where it was not popular (Van Bruinessen 1992:88, 143-6).

16 The references to roosters in seudati song lyrics and the rooster-crest headdress worn by the singer-dancers are among the reasons why Acehnese artists associate the dance with the farming communities in which it has thrived. Some Acehnese artists also believe that seudati was at one time used as dakwah to spread the faith. The solo seudati singers’ improvised lyrics in the extra (estra or lanie) sections are notorious for spreading religious, political, social or sexual ideas.
that women had a *ratêb saman* of their own, which was probably performed both as female group prayer and as an artistic performance for a female audience at celebrations, though today, according to my field experience, only the latter occurs. In 1982 and in 2004-2009, I attended several all-night Sufi gatherings of brotherhoods in village heads’ homes, *meunasah* or mosques. The men sat in circles singing praises of Allah, Muhammad and other prophets to their own frame-drums accompaniment, or sang unaccompanied from the Dalâ’il Khairat book of supplications in soaring unison, led by a local *teungku* or *ulama*. As the men sang and prayed, some swayed from side to side and sometimes clapped together rhythmically. To this day, on the occasion of a death, *samadiyah* (night-time *diké* chanting sessions led by a *teungku*) are held in villages, the climax of the chanting and religious fervour being reached on the seventh night. On more relaxed occasions, the men sit cross-legged.

The devotees, whether traditionalist or modernist, say they do not regard their performances of *diké* as ‘art’ because their aim while performing the *diké* is to achieve mystical union, not the worldly pleasure which art can bring. Yet it is not difficult to believe that such *diké* performances were the source of inspiration for artists who developed the sitting song-dance art forms and the frame-drum art forms, whether with religious lyrics or with secular lyrics. As in the *seudati* dance, the lead vocalist (*aneuk syahè*, lit., ‘child of poetry’) and the row of singer-dancers (*rakan*) in the religious *ratêb duek* (‘sitting liturgy’) sing Islamic lyrics, while in the secular genre known as *ratôh duek* (‘sitting chattering’) or *saman* (in parts of western Aceh), the lead vocalist and the row of performers sing mainly secular texts, about nature, love, and daily life (Amir 2006:202-3, see Figure 4).

In the very popular ‘extra’ (*éstra* or *lanie*) section of a secular *ratôh duek* performance, the lead singers delight – to this day – in improvising song lyrics that deal with political issues, nature and the sea, and make ribald sexual references. Sometimes they include quizzes, in sung question-and-response form, about the history and doctrines of Islam, which serve to educate performers and audiences about their faith. Thus, the more broad-minded *ulama* see the *éstra* as potential contributions to continuing *dakwah*, but they approve of this only if men and women perform separately and if male and female audiences watch the performances separately, and inside a building rather than in the open air (Amirullah 2006:2). Male and female groups perform *ratôh duek* separately, though both sing secular texts about romantic love, sailing, work, farming, religion and other aspects of daily life.

Both the religious and the secular genres have been performed in Aceh from at least as early as the 1890s (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:223), and probably much earlier than that, given the time it normally takes for such art forms to develop and consolidate as traditional practice. Performances of the liturgical *ratêb duek* continue today to promote *dakwah* as a pious way to main-
tain the faith, while the secular ratôh duek performances are also peripherally related to dakwah through their frequent addition of religious phrases, such as seulawut salam akan saidina (‘Salutations to our Lord’).

In order more fully to answer the question about how Aceh’s frame-drum genres and sitting song-dances may have originated and become established, it is necessary to take a brief look at the legends and history of dakwah, focusing on a few of the many Arab and Acehnese saints who are recognized as having contributed to the development and growth of Acehnese Islam.

The earliest Muslim writers in Southeast Asia that are known by name lived in Aceh in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They include Hamzah Fansuri,17 Syamsuddin of Pasai, Nuruddin ar-Raniri and ‘Abdurra’uf of

17 The Malay Sufi-Muslim poet and theologian Hamzah Fansuri was probably born in Fansur, alias Barus, on the northwest coast of North Sumatra, and died in 1590 (Attas 1970:10-1). He was denounced at the court of Aceh by the Malay-speaking Gujarati scholar Nuruddin Ar-Raniri (d. 1658) as a pantheistic heretic, but the Sufi line of thought was continued by the Sumatran-born theologian Abdurra’uf of Singkel (d. 1693), who studied in Yemen and Medina, and is best known for his translation and commentary on the Qur’an. For a discussion of these theologians’
Singkel, of whom the first and last are relevant to the present topic. The body of discourse about the Acehnese liturgy holds that these early writers, other foreign Muslim leaders or traders, and returning Acehnese pilgrims brought the prototypical liturgical exercises to Aceh from the Arabian Peninsula, and that the exercises developed and spread throughout Aceh via the expansion of the Naqsyabandiyah, Rifa’iyah, Qadiriyah, Shattariyah and Sammâniyah brotherhoods, each of which are associated with specific diké practices. ‘Abdurra’uf of Singkel, for example, is known as a theologian who ‘promoted certain ideas and spiritual exercises associated with Sufism’ (Bowen 1993:111). Indeed, he is revered, under his popular names of Teungku di Kuala or Syiah Kuala (‘saint of the river mouth’ [where his grave is believed to be located]), as the saint who brought Islam to Aceh.

Origins and development of the sitting song-dances

From as early as the late sixteenth century and still today, members of the brotherhoods in Aceh have followed the ilmu tasawwuf (‘body of Sufi knowledge’) that was taught to them by the great mystical Arab, Persian, Indian and Acehnese saints. The sixteenth-century Acehnese poet Hamzah Fansuri, who wrote magnificent poetry and prose tracts imbued with Sufi mysticism, was ‘received into the Qadiriyah fraternity’ in Baghdad, the town of the famous saint ‘Abdul Qadir al-Jilani, as mentioned in Fansuri’s Poem XXI (Drewes and Brakel 1986:5).

To this day, the solo vocalist (aneuk syahè) who leads the singing in the main religious sitting dances – the ratéb duek (‘sitting liturgy’) – performs lyrics that are based on the tasawwuf and promote the doctrine of the unity of being (wahdat al-wujud, or wujudiyah). The body-percussion episodes between or accompanying the episodes of group singing are also believed to be Muslim-inspired, as constituting a uniquely Acehnese response to the tasawwuf, and therefore seen as a contribution to dakwah.18 Another kind of religious exercise that featured body percussion was introduced by Acehnese followers of the seventeenth-century Arab mystic Muhammad Sammân, whose teachings resulted in the creation of the Sammâniyah brotherhood at Medina in the first half of the eighteenth century. Sammân composed the words and laid down the rules of the body movements and accompanying postures of this form of ratéb. After members of the Acehnese Sufi brotherhoods had become adept performers of the communal

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18 Personal communication, Marzuki Hassan in Blangpidie, 2007.
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liturgy (likë), some artists among them apparently developed the religious sitting dance (ratëb duek), with participants kneeling close together in rows or circles as they sang dikë while swaying from side to side and performing simple body percussion. As Snouck Hurgronje wrote, young devotees usually practised their religious exercises while sitting close together in a row or circle, either in a meunasah (male meeting house and prayer house) or in a village madrasah (male or female boarding school run by one or more ulama) (see photo in Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:2). He also wrote that men of all ages practised the ratëb separately in their homes and in the meunasah (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:2). In western Aceh today, the sitting song-dance is called ratëb saman or meuseukat.

Sammâniyah was the first Sufi brotherhood in Southeast Asia to attract a mass following, which expanded from the eighteenth century (Van Bruinessen 1994:6). It influenced the development and spread of saman dances throughout western Aceh and Gayo. The intoning of repetitive texts, rhythmic movements, and body percussion helped transport male devotees into a state of religious ecstasy through perceived union with Allah via the tasawwuf, as in Sufi practice the world over. Unlike other mystic teachers, who liked quiet and restraint for the performance of their dikë, Syèh Sammân held that loudness and motion ‘were powerful agents for producing the desired state of mystic transport’ (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:217). To this day the loudness and motion of saman or ratëb duek performances build up to a series of furiously fast, loud climaxes, with each episode coming to a sudden end, as in the frame-drum genres described below. Unlike the religious exercises, the artistic saman genres focus mainly on remembered or improvised secular texts and include solo and group vocal episodes which often reach a very fast tempo at climaxes, and feature episodes of virtuosic body percussion.

By the eighteenth century, returned pilgrims from Mecca and Medina had also further popularized the Shattariyah brotherhood. The Rifa’iyah and Qadiriyah brotherhoods had already spread to various parts of Aceh. In the early twenty-first century, the Qadiriyah, Rifa’iyah, and Shattariyah

19 The upland Gayo people also have a famous genre called saman, though performed in a very different style of singing, movement and body percussion.

20 In the seventeenth century, Acehnese disciples of the Arab saint Qushâshî’ (who flourished around 1661) spread the teachings of the Shattariyah brotherhood, and by the time Qushâshî’s teachings had reached the Acehnese populace, his ‘influence was more extensive and had a greater effect on the religious life of the individual’ than the other saints. His dikë was ‘confined to the repetition of certain formulas at fixed seasons, generally after the performance of the prescribed prayers (sembahyang)’ (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:216). Van Bruinessen writes that adherence to these orders may have involved little more than private recitation of their dhikr and wîrd (liturgy spoken aloud by an individual) (Van Bruinessen 1994:2).
brotherhoods are still alive, though less formally organized than they were mid-century.21

In many parts of western Aceh, the main ratêb duek-type genre is called ratêb meuseukat. In its secular form (with mainly secular lyrics) it is simply called meuseukat, or occasionally ratôh duek. A highlight of the body movement routines in this and similar genres is the galombang (‘wave’) (shown above in Figure 2), in which a row of dancers alternately kneel down on their heels then up with arms outstretched to create wavelike rotating movements, after which they may clap their own hands and then their neighbours’ hands, or perform other body percussion routines continuously for a period of time. Meanwhile, the lead vocalist (aneuk syahê) and his or her assistant stand on one side and sing preconceived and improvised lyrics, to which the rakan row responds in chorus, and the soloists and the row continue to alternate in this way for as long as the lead singer (aneuk syahê) or dance leader (syêh) decides. Performers in the row accompany the vocal music with their own body percussion, producing patterns of rhythmic-timbral sound by hand clapping, finger snapping, floor beating, thigh beating, shoulder beating, and chest beating (Figure 2).

Some early twentieth-century Acehnese artistic forms called ratêb—including ratêb meuseukat, ratêb Malabar and ratêb Hadat—are listed in Djajadiningrat’s Atjehsch-Nederlandsch Woordenboek (1934, II:504). Djajadiningrat (1934, II:504) thought that the Acehnese word meuseukat may have derived from the name ‘Muscat’, the present-day capital of Oman, implying that the genre was imported from Muscat, a town that admittedly lay on the trade route between Aceh and the holy land. However, on a recent visit to Muscat, I was informed that the word meuseukat is actually the plural of the Arabic word for ‘music’, and that it is not related to the word Muscat. Meuseukat appears to be an indigenous Acehnese word, though it is possible that the sitting song-dance called meuseukat may have derived from an overseas model. Whether ratêb Malabar and ratêb Hadat were imported from the Malabar coast and Hadat respectively, as Djajadiningrat thought, may never be known, as the forms are now obsolete.

Evidence from my elderly informants suggests that in the late nineteenth century it was the women who were responsible for developing and teaching the western Acehnese ratêb meuseukat genre with body-percussion accom-

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21 My sources here include Kyai A. Hasyim Musadi, the chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama (a traditionalist Sunni organization in Indonesia), who gave me this information after his discussions with more than 50 ulama from Aceh in Jakarta in 2003. The Sufi fraternity Rifa’iyah was once strong in parts of Aceh (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:249), though according to my field experience only a few present-day ulama appear to know of the connection.
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Paniment, partly as a form of continuing dakwah and partly for the community's enjoyment at celebrations. In many areas during the Darul Islam rebellion of the 1950s, ratèb meuseukat, like most of the other arts, was rarely performed. However, a remarkable choreographer, Ibu Cut Asiah, revived and re-choreographed the traditional meuseukat dance for the Bupati’s troupe of artists in Meulaboh during the 1960s, after which many female groups began to rehearse and perform it in various versions. From the 1970s, opportunities arose for participating in provincial competitions and international misi kesenian (performing arts missions), and some groups of men who had learned from women performers how to perform ratèb meuseukat embarked on provincial, national and international performing tours, appropriating the form. Meanwhile, some young female sanggar (dance schools and performing groups) in certain villages became interested in the new choreographies, and they gave more performances. From the 1970s, when the New Order government directed civil servants and children to perform political song texts with more virtuosic choreographies, it became mandatory for meuseukat, ratôh duek and other troupes to sing propaganda texts in their performances during election campaigns, at official ceremonies, and on the local and national media.

The precise origin of the Acehnese sitting genres with body percussion, then, may never be known. It is probable that they developed as indigenous expressions based on the practice of Sufi group prayer, which sometimes leads to simple swaying and body percussion, in or before the early eighteenth century, when the Sammâniyah brotherhood began to extend its influence, given its successful propagation of the ratèb and associated ratok duek saman forms to this day. The theory of an indigenous Acehnese origin of art forms based on the ratèb gained credence in 2004 when ethnomusicologist Iwan Amir visited some male and female religious schools and found that students sitting or kneeling in a row are taught melodically to chant the ‘ninety-nine characteristics of Allah’ (sifeut), the praises of the Prophet (angguk rabbani), the declaration of faith, the religious laws (rukon), and the book of supplications (Dala’il Khairat). As they chant the religious songs, they sometimes sway and occasionally clap rhythmically, unlike in solo Qur’anic recitation (beu’et Qu’ran), group Qur’anic recitation (daroiht), and individual recitation of the liturgy aloud (wird). As Amir (2006:39, 41) concludes, it is quite likely that the ratèb song-dances derived from the creative imagination of participants in liturgical exercises while rhythmically swaying their bodies and clapping.

Female ratèb duek, kasidah and nasit, which feature devotional group singing with sitting or standing dancing and optional frame-drum playing, became more dominant in Aceh from the late 1980s.
From the 1980s, some official and commercially sponsored teams of artists found new ways of creating secular song-dances ‘with an Islamic flavour’. For example, the tari Arab (‘Arab dance’) is choreographed for mixed couples wearing Arab-influenced costumes who perform Malay couples-style dancing (joget) with simple body percussion and a pop-Arab-sounding vocal melody, accompanied by a gambus (plucked lute of Arab origin) and pop-band instruments. The dance was developed by the governor’s art troupe in Banda Aceh in 2002 and was performed in Lhokseumawe at its traditional performing arts festival in 2003. Some artists complain, however, that the body-percussion sounds are drowned out by the loud pop-band accompaniment, and most religious leaders disapprove of the dance on moral and religious grounds, mainly because it allows mixed-gender couples dancing on stage. Certainly tari Arab has little direct connection to dakwah.

During the decades of armed conflict between the Indonesian military and the Free Aceh Movement (1974-2005), poor security in many areas limited the liturgical activities of Sufi brotherhoods, and seriously reduced rehearsals and performances at ceremonies and on religious holidays in the villages. Competitive all-night performances were very rarely held. After the 2004 tsunami and the 2005 peace accord, art troupes re-formed or were newly created, and opportunities for performing at official functions and village celebrations proliferated, though the performances were frequently in shortened form. At the time of writing, full-length competitions have not yet been resumed.

Although group forms of body percussion – especially simple clapping or finger snapping – are found in the artistic genres of many Muslim countries, no other Muslim culture has developed an advanced art form of group body percussion that can remotely compare with the musical intricacy and emotional impact of Aceh’s. The episodes of intricate interlocking body percussion in some of the sitting and standing dances tend to feature complex formal structures, a high degree of timbral and dynamic virtuosity, and tempo change that are unique to Aceh. While it is true that the West Sumatran indang genre somewhat resembles aspects of the Acehnese sitting song-dance forms, and that its randai theatre scenes are interspersed with episodes of rhythmic hand clapping and performers clapping their baggy trousers (Pauka 1998), the Minangkabau people do not claim body percussion as a major feature of their identity; that claim is reserved for Aceh. Spanish flamenco dancers also perform complex body percussion (as part of a tradition that may be related to Spain’s Muslim past), but it is a completely different solo or duo activity, not a group tradition, as it is in Aceh.
Origins and development of the frame-drum genres

The song-dances divide into two types: those accompanied by a frame-drum group and performed only by men, and those accompanied by body percussion and performed by women only (or by men only). I shall now discuss the frame-drum genres.

Members of some Sufi brotherhoods liked to accompany their singing or chanting with their own frame-drum playing. The most important saint in the development of religious exercises with frame-drum playing in Aceh was the Persian-born ‘Abdul Qādir al-Jilani (c. 1077-1166 CE), after whom the Quadir’īyah brotherhood is named. An Acehnese legend holds that he brought the frame drum down to earth when he was born (Kartomi 2004:53-4). His younger contemporary, Ahmed ar-Rifa’i (d. 1182 CE), who founded the Rifa’īyah brotherhood in the Arabian Peninsula in the twelfth century, is also reputed to have approved of frame-drum playing. By 1320, Rifa’īyah was well established as a brotherhood in Acehnese society, and Rifa’ī himself was held in high honour as ‘the great saint of the mystics’ (Snouck Hurgronje 1906, II:49). Indeed, some artists believe that the word for the Acehnese frame drum – rapa’ī – may have derived from Rifa’ī’s name. It was the practice for Sufi brotherhood members to meet in the local meunasah or in each other’s homes, sitting cross-legged or kneeling in a row or a circle to perform religious exercises (ratēb duek, with various sub-categories of types of worship) for nights on end, accompanying themselves on their frame drums. Among the outward forms of Rifa’īyah-associated worship was the melodic invocation of the most beautiful names of Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, and the other prophets, which were repeated mesmerizingly for hours on end, occasionally even for several days. Eventually the worshippers began to sway from side to side, all the while accompanying themselves on their frame drums. A heightened awareness of the divine presence resulted from the cumulative effect of the repetition of the names of Allah and the prophets together with the musical sounds and body movements.

The most revered type of frame drum in Aceh is the rapa’ī Pasè, thousands of which are still kept as heirlooms and played at official functions in northern Aceh (Figure 5). The rapa’ī Pasè is one of the largest types of frame drums (drums suspended from frames) in the world. Its players beat them with all their

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24 Kartomi 2004:53-4. The above-mentioned Kyai A. Hasyim Musadi said that the the Rifa’īyah brotherhood is still alive in Aceh today, that the Naqsyabandiyah is the strongest brotherhood, and that the Qadiriyah, Qushāshī and Shattariyah brotherhoods also have communities of followers in Aceh today (personal communication, 2003).
might. The name *rapa‘i Pasè* still inspires pride in Southeast Asia’s first Muslim kingdom (Samudra/Pasai in the 1290s CE), after which the drums are named. Given this historical connection, the drums are believed to belong to a centuries-old tradition, though there is no way of proving this. Until the 1960s, all-night *rapa‘i Pasè* performances that were held at family celebrations commonly featured drumming episodes between competing groups of players. Rhythmic episodes played on up to 50 large frame drums were interspersed with male vocalists singing lyrics about religion, daily affairs, military repression, or any other subject. Performances, however, became rare during the decades of armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian military; many drums were hidden down wells, or lost as war booty. However, after peace was declared in 2005 the genre began to be revived. East-coast families still carefully store and play these mystically potent heirlooms, though many were sold to collectors and government officials in the difficult economic and security situation of the conflict and the ensuing period of peace.

At an unknown point in time, Acehnese artist-devotees developed another genre of group frame-drum playing called *rapa‘i dabôh* (Ar.: *dabbus*, Ind.:

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Figure 5. A set of *rapa‘i Pasè*, a single *rapa‘i Pasè* and the layout of a *rapa‘i Pasè* competition observed by the author in Lhokseumawe in 1982. Drawings by the author and Gary Swinton. (reproduced, with the publisher’s permission, from Kartomi 2004:82.)
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dabus) (see Figure 6), based on a Muslim invulnerability cult imported from the Middle East or India. Various forms of dabus are still popular in parts of eastern, northern, and western Aceh to this day. I have observed several rapa’i dabôh performances in which scores of drummers seek divine union and physical invulnerability by beating their frame drums in interlocking rhythms while building up an exciting atmosphere as they repeat the names of Allah, Muhammad and the other prophets, and a few devotees stand and stab themselves with an awl (dabbus) or other implement without feeling pain, as a sign of their unity with Allah (see Figure 6). A khalifah (religious performance leader), who is believed to be a spiritual successor of the saint Rifa’i, helps some of the participants to express their religious fervour by supervising their devotional expressions. In northern Aceh a competitive form of dabôh has developed, in which the musicians on one side try to confuse their opponents by playing driving rhythms that disrupt the established rhythms that are being played by the other side, aiming thereby to bring them to a musical halt and disturb the concentration of their awl-wielding devotees. If the situation becomes dangerous for the devotees, the khalifah orders both sides to stop the performance (Kartomi 1991). Of all the frame-drum genres practised in the twentieth and early

twenty-first centuries, *rapa’i dabôh* performances have the clearest link to the kind of *dakwah* that involves continuing expressions of piety aiming to reach divine union, but they are also linked to the building up of a martial spirit before a battle, and competitive displays of male power and strength.

Another frame-drum genre is the *rapa’i pulot*, which appears to have developed in the nineteenth century or earlier. The *rakan row* insert Muslim phrases into their singing of mainly secular texts as they play virtuosic episodes of interlocking rhythmic-timbral music on their medium-sized frame drums, while acrobats perform episodes of amazing or amusing stunts. The *rapa’i geurimpheng* genre is similar to *rapa’i pulot*, but does not feature acrobats, who were possibly added in the early twentieth century. A genre that developed in western Aceh from the 1960s was the *rapa’i gêlêng* (‘[head]-turning frame drum’), in which the participants play medium-sized frame drums in a highly virtuosic fashion with strenuous, vigorous body movements while repeatedly moving their heads from side to side, which is reminiscent of the practice of looking to the right and the left at the end of communal prayers (Kartomi 2004:60-72). As the *rapa’i Pasè, rapa’i pulot, rapa’i geurimpheng*, and *rapa’i gêlêng* performances use frame drums that accompany either religious or secular texts with Muslim phrases added, they are all regarded as artistic genres ‘with an Islamic flavour’.

Although north-coastal communities may have practiced *ratêb* (with or without frame-drum playing) in the Pasè sultanate from the 1290s, it probably spread widely as membership of the Rifa’iyah brotherhood expanded, perhaps from the fifteenth century. According to the above-mentioned Teuku Tjut Mohamad Hoessin and other elderly informants, *rapa’i geurimpheng, rapa’i pulot* and *rapa’i geleng* have been played since the late nineteenth century in a tightly organized, regimented style that requires sustained displays of strength and endurance, while the heavier *rapa’i dabôh* have required players of even greater strength, especially when playing in the devotional Sufi *dabôh* and the *rapa’i Pasè* performances, both of which are normally played

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27 Personal communication with the late Teuku Tjut Mohamad Hoessin, Oedjong Kalak, Meulaboh 1982; see Figure 7.

28 As suggested by the name and current importance of the *rapa’i Pasè* as a symbol of Acehnese identity, the *rapa’i Pasè* is played at most festival openings and other official occasions, much as the great gong is in Java.

29 Measuring up to a metre in diameter and played in a suspended position by standing performers, large numbers of *rapa’i Pasè* were played till the 1960s in competitions between village troupes, as were the *rapa’i geurimpheng, rapa’i pulot* and *rapa’i geleng*, all of which measure about 60 cm in diameter and are normally played in sitting position (Kartomi 2004).
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In addition to the group frame-drum and vocal genres, there are secular ensembles that minimally comprise a shawm, a pair of double-headed drums, a set of rapa’i geurimpheng, and a small, loud, high-pitched dap.30 The latter is the smallest frame drum in Aceh (measuring 8 cm in diameter), introduced long ago from Persia, India or Arabia (Dick 1984:534). The name and design of the dap derives from the similar Persian-Arab instrument called daff, and it is also known in Aceh as rapa’i aneuk (lit., ‘child frame drum’). In addition, medium-sized frame drums form part of instrumental ensembles that minimally comprise a shawm and a pair of double-headed drums. These ensembles usually play purely musical items or accompany dances on Muslim holidays such as Maulid Nabi (birthday of the Prophet), at family cel-

30 The Acehnese dap (or dab) derives from the Persian-Arab frame drum daff (also written daph, daf, daff). The name and the instrument itself were probably introduced into Aceh from the Delhi sultanate in the late twelfth century CE after Muslim Turko-Afghans had introduced it in Delhi (Dick 1984, I:545).

Figure 7. A row of male performers play their frame drums (rapa’i geurimpheng) at the Bupati’s Arts and Tourism performance in Meulaboh on 7 March 2007. Photo: Iwan Amir.
 Celebrations, and on official occasions, such as celebration of national holidays. Like all ensembles that contain frame drums, they are regarded as having an ‘Islamic flavour’.

Acehnese artists rightly regard their frame-drum performance styles, like their sitting dances with body percussion, as unique attributes of their Muslim music-cultural identity. Other Muslim peoples in Sumatra (especially West Sumatra and Malaysia) also accompany their religious and secular songs with group frame-drum playing, but Acehnese artists play a much greater range of types and sizes of frame drums, have developed some unique genres of frame-drum playing, associate the instruments with different legends, and have strikingly different performance practices, especially as regards rhythm, tempo and dynamics.

Conclusion

Research to date suggests that the distinctive artistic styles and qualities of the sitting song-dances were developed by local genius in Aceh, not by direct import from Arabia or India, though the basic idea of reaching divine union through these devotional forms was originally introduced by Acehnese religious leaders who had studied with the saints in the holy land, other seats of Islamic learning, or Aceh itself. According to the body of discourse by Acehnese artists, art researchers, and religious thinkers on the performing arts, the male and female sitting song-dance genres with religious or secular texts were originally developed from unaccompanied liturgical exercises (dikê) performed in the prostrated position assumed by worshippers at ritual prayer, with the devotees sometimes swaying their bodies and clapping rhythmically as prototypes of body percussion. Groups of individuals were motivated over time to practise the religious and secular art forms as part of celebrations of rites of passage and on religious holidays, as well as benefiting personally and socially from such creative expression and pursuits. The sitting dances, performed in all-male or all-female groups, were developed as an early form of dakwah used to convert the Acehnese to a Sufi-influenced form of Shafi‘i Islam. The long-term performance of the genres also served the purposes of dakwah in its other sense, as a continuing call to believers to deepen their faith and piety.

In large areas of western Aceh in the late nineteenth century, oral reports suggest that female groups were the exclusive performers of the ratèh meuseukat and ratôh meuseukat, and this probably remained so until the 1970s, when some male groups appropriated the form for touring and other performance opportunities. Yet the women contend, on the basis of names and facts, that their female forebears made a major contribution to the creative development
of the meuseukat genre, including its complex body-percussion component, and in the early twenty-first century, they feel they still own it.

The largely secular ratôh duek genres were eventually classified as ‘arts with an Islamic flavour’ in contrast to the ratêb duek genres, which were categorized as ‘arts with an Islamic theme’. Only the latter are fully accepted by modernist Muslims, though some tolerate ‘arts with an Islamic flavour’ as long as they are performed in a building in which the genders can be segregated.

Research by Acehnese artists and thinkers also concludes that the frame-drum-accompanied genres were based on styles taught by proselytizing followers of the Arab saints Ahmad Rifa’i and ‘Abdul Qādir al-Jilani and the Sumatran-born Hamzah Fansuri, and that the body-percussion-accompanied genres developed from genres taught by followers of the Arab saints Ahmed Qushâshî and Mohammad Sammân and the Aceh-born scholar ‘Abdurra’uf. Sammân’s approach went further than the others in expanding the dynamic range and intensity of body-percussion performance, and it also influenced frame-drum performance styles as well, for example in the rapa’i geurimpheng, rapa’i pulot and rapa’i geleng genres, which tend to build up to a fast and furious tempo and dynamic level, and to end episodes with accelerated cadences and sudden, loud endings. All frame-drum genres are classified as having an Islamic flavour, but those that accompany singing of religious texts are regarded as being Islamic art.

All the sitting-dance genres are characterized by their complex solo vocal style, choral responses, and elaborate body percussion, and the frame-drum genres by their solo vocal style, choral responses, and frame-drum accompaniment. The body percussion in the ratêb duek and ratôh duek genres and the frame-drum playing in the rapa’i geurimpheng and other frame-drum genres are also seen to contribute to the dominant Acehnese sense of identity, which is by definition Muslim.

In Aceh’s gender-segregated society, the religious and secular or animist genres with frame-drum accompaniment are limited to male performers and are associated with masculinity, while the genres with body-percussion accompaniment, performed by both genders separately, are associated with an Islamic idea of femininity when performed by female groups and an Islamic idea of masculinity when performed by male groups.

Since the 1970s the concept of dakwah has served as a focus of various Islamic, nationalist and developmentalist programs that have attracted public and official support in urban and rural Aceh, and the sitting-dance and frame-drum genres were used in many of these programs. Since the 1980s, some official and commercially sponsored teams of artists in the cities have found new ways of creating dances with a Muslim flavour by composing melodies that sound Arab, accompanying them in performance with Arab
and international pop instruments, dressing performers in Arab-influenced costumes, and dancing in mixed couples with simple body percussion. Some artists criticize these ‘new creations’ on aesthetic grounds, as the sound of the body percussion is drowned out by the pop-band accompaniment, while religious leaders criticize them for their alleged irreligious aspect. However, others regard the new dances as acceptable as a modern development of ancient Acehnese-Malay joget dancing, with its particular Islamic flavour. While the differences of opinion in the discourse about the sitting dances and frame-drum genres are significant, a broad consensus exists about their likely Sufi origin and development for the purposes of dakwah, past and present.

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