THE ULAMA IN ACEHNESE SOCIETY
A Preliminary Observation*

I

Islam is the religion of the large majority of Indonesians. Needless to add, the ulama (Islamic religious scholars) have an important role in their society. The present Indonesian government seems to recognize this as it has been trying to court the active participation of the ulama in the development process of the country.  

In a number of Indonesia's 26 provinces the influence of Islam has been particularly deep as can be observed in the social and cultural behavior of the society. Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra with now just over two million inhabitants, is one of these provinces. A preliminary study of the role of the ulama in this particular province, what this paper is all about, could probably help us to at least partly understand the complexities surrounding Indonesia's apparent anxiety to develop herself today.

II

In the past, in order to become ulama an Acehnese had to leave his village to study at one of the traditional religious schools called dayah (in Java, pesantren). Leaving the village for such a purpose was called meudagang. Even though he could learn the teachings of Islamic religion in his own village, generally the villagers would not consider it sufficient to accord him with the respectful title of teungku or ulama.  

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1. Ulama is the plural form of the Arabic word alim (alem). In Acehm and in all indonesia as well, both alim and ulama can be either singular or plural. They, however, have slightly different meanings. Alim is a person considered to be less learned in Islam than an ulama.

2. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, for example, has been courting the participation of the ulama in national development through seminars in which the role of religious leaders in development has become one of the main topics.

During *meudagang* in the *dayah* he went through a new kind of personal experience which was to be distinctively different from what he previously had before leaving his village. He eventually became a person with two cultural backgrounds, one based on the reality of the actual social life he had found in his village, the other something new that he had learned in the *dayah*. Through the latter he was to discover an ideal conception about how the society should be, that was different from the one reflected in the actual daily behavior of the Acehnese. Consequently, he found himself with a mission to reform his society. Thus, originally and basically the *ulama* as a group saw themselves as, and played the role of, reformers. It explains why one of the most distinctive features of Acehnese history has been the periodical recurrence of the *ulama*-led reform movements. Even though they never achieved their intended goals, these reform-movements always had an enormous appeal in Acehnese society, especially among the peasants in the countryside.4

As reformers the *ulama* seemed to perform the role of intellectuals who brought new ideas into society. With Islam they created a common bond among all the Acehnese based on the concept of equality of men under religion despite the differences in social identifications which separated them. As such, the *ulama* were able to offer a foundation for the unity of the various groups or classes - the sultan (king), the uleebalangs (*adat* chieftains), the *ulama* and the common people in the villages. This had particularly appealed to the common people. Their continuous strong support of the causes of the *ulama*-led reform movements was, however, partly due to the fact that the other two important elements of the society at that time, the sultan and the uleebalangs, possessed limited influence among the masses in the countryside. James Siegel observed that in nineteenth century Aceh "the basis of effective ties between people from different sectors of society was not common dependence and mutual need for each other as villager, lord, sultan, and uleebalang, but common identity as Muslims, which superseded all other distinctions".5

III

The strength of that unity under Islam was clearly shown during the Acehnese war against the Dutch, known as the *Aceh War*,6 which started in 1873 and lasted for nearly forty years. The *ulama* were instrumental in turning it into a religious holy war. With Islam as their common ideology they fought their common enemy, the Dutch *kafirs* (unbelievers), fiercely. Partly through their use of the poetic folktale about the holy war, the *Hikayat Prang Sabi*, the *ulama* were able to stimulate and maintain the fighting spirit of the people. Their emotion was cleverly cultivated through the promises conveyed along the lines of the *hikayat* that their

4. James Siegel, op cit., pp. 48-60
5. Ibid, p. 77.