

**The Cosmopolitanism and uniqueness of Aceh
(Kosmopolitanisma dan keAcehan dalam Sejarah Aceh)**

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In revisiting Aceh for the first time since the tsunami, two things strike me: firstly the appalling losses which have been suffered individually by everybody I meet and collectively by this devastated city. This scale of destruction makes it hard for those of us who did not experience it to speak at all. It is a time for us humbly to listen, and to try to help.

On the encouraging side, it is astonishing to see what a cosmopolitan city Banda Aceh has become since the tsunami, with thousands of people from all over the world joining in the reconstruction efforts. Probably one would have to go back 200 years to find a time when Aceh was as cosmopolitan, as diverse in the way it represented peoples from the whole world in its population.

As far as I can see Acehnese have reacted very well to this remarkable influx of diverse people, of all nationalities and religions, despite fears in some quarters that Aceh was a homogeneous and closed society which would have problems adjusting. For those who know the long term history of Aceh and its place in the world, this should not be surprising. It has in fact been the genius of Aceh to be able to maintain a high degree of both cosmopolitanism and a strong sense of the importance and uniqueness of its own culture.

Cosmopolitanism

Aceh’s geographical position made it a natural crossroads, essentially mediating between all the traffic of the Indian Ocean and that of the Southeast Asian world. Chinese and Arab sources knew the region as Lamri (Lamuri, Lan-wo-li), for centuries before the better-known centre of Samudra/Pasai (Lhokseumawe) became established around the 13th century. Indian traders are known to have settled in the region as early as the 11th century. Pasai sent 22 missions to China in the 15th Century, and received several in return. When Ibn Battuta visited Pasai in the 14th Century it was already an important port on the trading route between Arabia, India and China, and its ruler in relations with his peers around the Indian Ocean. A significant migration of traders from Champa, on what is today’s Central Vietnam coast, contributed to the rise of the dynasty of Aceh around 1500, if we are to believe the *Sejarah Melayu*.

In the 16th century Aceh established close relations especially with the Muslim states around the Indian Ocean, including Bijapur, Gujerat and Ottoman Turkey, then the overlord of Mecca and Madinah. Ulama, traders, soldiers and craftsmen came to the Acehnese capital from all these places, making Aceh the eastern bulwark of the whole Islamic trading and military network of the Indian Ocean. The *Hikayat Aceh* correctly refers to traders in Banda Aceh “from the Arab world, Persia, Turkey, the Mughal empire

and all India”.¹ Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries Aceh was the principal centre for Islamic scholarship in Malay, and attracted scholars and students from every quarter.

The cosmopolitanism of the 17th century extended well beyond this Islamic world. The navigator John Davis, in 1598, already noted that there was one quarter of the city for the Chinese merchants, and others for Muslim Gujaratis and Arabs, Christian Portuguese, Hindu Bengalis and the Buddhist Mon people of southern Burma.² To this were soon added English, Dutch, French and Danish traders. Buddhist Siam was the one Southeast Asian country with which Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-36) exchanged regular ambassadors on a basis of equality. Later, under the four queens of Aceh (1641-99), Banda Aceh became known as the one free Nusantara port not subject to Dutch monopoly pressures (after the fall of Makasar 1669, and Banten, 1684). It extended tolerance to a great range of foreign traders, including a Christian community of about 100 looked after by a Franciscan priest.

Aceh’s strategic position, but also its commercial products, ensured that it remained of interest to the world’s traders through the 19th century. Foreigners came for its gold, its camphor, its elephants (exported to India in the 17th century), its betelnut and above all its pepper. As the monopolies of Dutch and English Companies began to collapse in the 1790s, the world’s traders discovered a new source of pepper on Aceh’s west coast. Up to 20 pepper-ships a year came from the newly-independent United States, from Britain and France, to supply the world with Aceh’s pepper in the period 1800-50. Thereafter Penang became the main base for the pepper-trade, so it was more local Chinese and British traders from that British-ruled island who dealt with the Acehnese pepper producers and traders. In this period Europeans and Chulia (Tamil Muslim) merchants, and Arab ulama, played the key roles in advising the sultan on international matters.

This global trade in turn ensured that the Acehnese court remained in relations with the world’s powers. In the 19th century missions were sent to and received from Paris, Istanbul and the Singapore representatives of Britain, the United States and Italy. Aceh was invaded in 1873, finally, not because it was isolated and closed, but on the contrary because Batavia panicked that these extensive international relations might result in a successful treaty to lock out the Dutch.

Acehnese-ness

One cannot deny, however, that this cosmopolitanism was in tension with the other key feature of pre-colonial Aceh—its intense opposition to foreign control or influence on its soil. The reason Aceh could remain free from the monopolies of the Dutch in the 17th and 18th centuries was precisely this fierce suspicion of the motives of foreign powers. The Aceh sultanate united northern Sumatra in the 1520s on a program of throwing the Portuguese out of the area, and it continued this presumption that its role was to combat foreign intrusion. The English, Dutch and French were all very interested in establishing a pepper-buying base in Aceh, but abandoned these plans in the 1620s because the terms

1 T. Iskandar (ed.) *De Hikajat Atjeh*, (The Hague: KITLV, 1958), p.165.

2 Cited in *Witnesses to Sumatra: A Travellers’ Anthology*, ed. Anthony Reid, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.20.

were too difficult. In particular Acehese rulers refused to allow the foreign companies to build defensible buildings from brick or stone, having learned from the experience of Melaka and Jakarta.

Later, when the British in the 1780s were looking anxiously for a base in Southeast Asia from which they could trade to China, Aceh was again on the agenda as the only Archipelago port not under Dutch or Spanish influence already. But Francis Light warned, as others had before him, that the people were aggressively Muslim, so that “to form a settlement there of safety and advantage, a force sufficient to subdue all the chiefs would be necessary.”³ Instead the British acquired Penang from the Sultan of Kedah.

How fiercely Acehese resisted Dutch intrusion after 1873 is too well known to need repetition. What was it that they were defending – their homes, the Sultan, Islam, or Acehese identity itself? I think the answer is all of these, at different times and in different combinations. Yet curiously, even at the depth of its struggle against the Dutch, when Aceh seemed at its most closed and embittered to the Dutch regime, it retained enough cosmopolitanism to be attractive to ordinary European soldiers. Forty-eight European men defected from the Dutch forces to the Acehese in the period 1882-1892, taking their place within a society that seemed ready to accept them.

Combining cosmopolitanism and Acehese-ness

The point I want to make here is that the unique and remarkable culture of Aceh has always existed in combination with, even if also sometimes in tension with, a very strong cosmopolitanism. We should not think of these two qualities as necessarily opposed. Rather the one made the other both necessary and possible. Aceh defended ferociously its freedom to choose its own friends, its own cosmopolitanism.

As Aceh now rebuilds itself after the tsunami, I believe there is a distinct possibility to utilize this moment of cosmopolitanism to help rebuild its Acehese-ness, and vice-versa. The large number of outsiders now in Aceh may be considered a cultural threat, in one sense. But as the Balinese know very well, foreigners want to appreciate what is unique in the society they visit, not what is just like the McDonalds back home.

I believe this is a vitally important moment to establish the new Aceh Cultural Institute, and I and my friends from Singapore wish it well. We will do what we can from the outside to help restore Aceh’s memory of its past through collections of books and documents; to preserve the maximum of Aceh’s rich archeological heritage, much of which lies beneath the ground about to be rebuilt on; and to display Aceh’s culture and history attractively in museum collections that can inform both Acehese and others about this distinctive tradition.

I wish the Aceh Cultural Institute every success.

³ Francis Light to Governor-General, 15.2.1786, cited Lee Kam Hing, *The Sultanate of Aceh: Relations with the British, 1760-1824* (Kuala Lumpur: OUP, 1995), p.80.