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The Art of Resistance:  
Trauma, Gender, and Traditional Performance  
in Acehnese Communities, 1976-2011

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Women's Studies

by

Kimberly Svea Clair

2012



## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Art of Resistance:  
Trauma, Gender, and Traditional Performance  
in Acehese Communities, 1976-2011

by

Kimberly Svea Clair  
Doctor of Philosophy in Women's Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles, 2012  
Professor Susan McClary, Chair

After nearly thirty years of separatist conflict, Aceh, Indonesia was hit by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, a disaster that killed 230,000 and left 500,000 people homeless. Though numerous analyses have focused upon the immediate economic and political impact of the conflict and the tsunami upon Acehese society, few studies have investigated the continuation of traumatic experience into the “aftermath” of these events and the efforts that Acehese communities have made towards trauma recovery. My dissertation examines the significance of Acehese performance traditions—including dance, music, and theater practices—for Acehese trauma survivors. Focusing on the conflict, the tsunami, political and religious oppression, discrimination, and hardships experienced within the diaspora, my dissertation explores the

benefits and limitations of Acehese performance as a tool for resisting both large-scale and less visible forms of trauma.

Humanitarian workers and local artists who used Acehese performance to facilitate trauma recovery following the conflict and the tsunami in Aceh found that the traditional arts offered individuals a safe space in which to openly discuss their grievances, to strengthen feelings of cultural belonging, and to build solidarity with community members. Outside of Aceh, Acehese communities have used their performance practices to reconnect with their cultural identity and to combat discrimination, feelings of isolation, and other hardships experienced abroad. Women in contemporary Aceh have also found solace in performance, which can provide an opportunity to resist the restrictions imposed upon them by syariah (Islamic) law.

At the same time, efforts to use performance for trauma recovery must take into account the diverse healing needs of community members. Many of the performance workshops in Aceh failed to address the ways in which Acehese women and girls were differentially affected by the violence and the tsunami. My research also suggests that Aceh's conservative religious atmosphere has limited Acehese women's performance opportunities and has influenced the ways in which Acehese women and girls, including those in the diaspora, interact with their performance traditions. Investigating how individuals' experiences with trauma, as well as the healing methods they employ, are inflected by gender, ethnicity, class, age, sexual identity, and geographical location, my dissertation addresses the complex possibilities of performance as a tool for resisting, if not recovering from, trauma.

The dissertation of Kimberly Svea Clair is approved.

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2012

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Committee Page.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Vita.....	viii
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Histories of Acehnese Identity.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Background.....	7
Reconstructing History.....	13
<i>The Golden Age (1509 – 1699)</i> .....	13
<i>The Dutch-Aceh War (1873 – 1903)</i> .....	20
<i>Religious Reforms and the Darul Islam Rebellion (1920 – 1959)</i> .....	24
<i>The Separatist Conflict, the Tsunami, and the Peace (1976 – 2011)</i> .....	32
The Lie that Tells the Truth.....	43
<i>Military Heroism and Self-Reliance</i> .....	44
<i>Islamic Devotion</i> .....	46
<i>Acehnese Women: Heroes and Victims</i> .....	48
Conclusion.....	51
<b>Chapter 2: Adat, Gender, and Aceh’s Performing Arts.....</b>	<b>52</b>
Understanding Adat.....	53
Acehnese Adat.....	57
<i>Merantau</i> .....	57
<i>Matrifocality</i> .....	61
Acehnese Performance.....	70
<i>Background</i> .....	70
<i>Reinforcing Assumptions</i> .....	75
<i>The Uses and Abuses of Tradition</i> .....	81
Performing a Different Story.....	89
Conclusion.....	93
<b>Chapter 3: Transforming Trauma: Performance and Healing in Aceh.....</b>	<b>94</b>
Trauma and the Arts in Aceh (1976 – 2011).....	96
<i>Untangling Trauma Discourses</i> .....	97
<i>Gendered Traumas</i> .....	105
<i>The Conflict, the Tsunami, and the Arts</i> .....	111
Performance and Trauma Recovery.....	115
<i>International Organizations</i> .....	116
<i>Local Organizations</i> .....	126
<i>Individual Performers</i> .....	135
Conclusion.....	149

<b>Chapter 4: Transported Traditions</b> .....	151
Acehnese in Jakarta: Then and Now .....	153
<i>Waves of Migration</i> .....	153
<i>Demographic</i> .....	156
<i>Challenges</i> .....	159
<i>Tactics</i> .....	164
Acehnese Dance in Jakarta .....	168
<i>Cultural Events</i> .....	168
<i>Informal Instruction</i> .....	174
<i>Formal Instruction</i> .....	180
<i>Remaking Traditions</i> .....	189
Acehnese Hikayat in Jakarta .....	195
<i>Filling the Seats</i> .....	196
<i>Remaking Tradition</i> .....	198
Conclusion .....	199
<b>Chapter 5: Notes from Backstage</b> .....	202
Acehnese Dance Rehearsals .....	204
<i>Aceh, Indonesia</i> .....	205
<i>Sydney, Australia</i> .....	208
<i>Yogyakarta, Indonesia</i> .....	210
<i>Jakarta, Indonesia</i> .....	211
<i>Analysis</i> .....	227
TELA .....	233
<i>Building Trust (Weeks 1-4)</i> .....	236
<i>Finding Our Ruptures (Weeks 5-8)</i> .....	241
<i>Building Scenes (Weeks 9-12)</i> .....	249
<i>The Performance (Weeks 13-16)</i> .....	253
<i>Analysis</i> .....	257
The Art of Rehearsal .....	260
<b>Chapter 6: Looking Back, Moving Forward: Reflections on Trauma, Gender, and Acehnese Performance</b> .....	267
Looking Back .....	267
Moving Forward .....	275
<i>Arts Activism and Education</i> .....	276
<i>Feminist Futures</i> .....	280
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	285



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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the significance of traditional Acehnese performance—including dance, music, and theater practices—for Acehnese communities living in Aceh and Jakarta. Specifically, my research investigates the possibilities of traditional performance -as a tool for trauma recovery for Acehnese survivors of the GAM separatist conflict (1976-2005) and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. My research is also concerned with how experiences of trauma, methods of trauma recovery, and the ways in which Acehnese interact with their performance traditions are shaped by gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, and geographical location.

The opening chapter of this dissertation, “Histories of Acehnese Identity,” aims to introduce readers to the multiple and contested narratives of Acehnese history that continue to inform how Acehnese identity is constructed and represented today. Through my close reading of key historical events, including the “Golden Age” of Aceh’s empire, the Dutch-Aceh war, the Darul Islam rebellion, and the GAM separatist conflict, I examine both how and why these events have been (mis)interpreted, distorted, and revised in ways that offer a limited or inaccurate portrayal of what it means to be Acehnese. My alternative reading of Acehnese history thus aims to challenge dominant narratives and to present a more complex and nuanced understanding of Acehnese identity.

Chapter 2, “*Adat*, Gender, and Aceh’s Performing Arts,” examines *adat*, which translates as “custom,” or “tradition,” as another site in which Acehnese identity is represented, constructed, or manipulated. Viewing traditions as both fluctuating beliefs and practices, and as rigid entities that signify stability, coherence and singularity, this chapter investigates how Acehnese traditions, including the practices of *merantau*, matrifocality, and Acehnese performance, can both reinforce and contest dominant narratives of Acehnese identity. This

chapter also investigates how Acehese traditions have informed attitudes toward gender roles in contemporary Acehese society.

These opening chapters thus aim to equip readers with a nuanced understanding of Acehese history, identity, and performance traditions—an understanding that is crucial for examining the significance of traditional performance as a method for trauma recovery in Aceh. Chapter 3, “Transforming Trauma: Performance and Healing in Aceh,” focuses specifically upon the efforts of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local NGOs, and individual Acehese performers to use Aceh’s traditional arts as a healing mechanism for conflict and tsunami survivors in Aceh. Questioning how and for whom traditional performance can be an effective tool for addressing trauma, I also illuminate the limitations of these efforts, including their failure to address gendered experiences of trauma and healing.

If Acehese performance can be used to treat trauma resulting from the conflict and the tsunami, what other kinds of traumas might Acehese performance be able to address? Chapter 4, “Transported Traditions,” tackles this question by turning to communities of Acehese living in Jakarta. Through my exploration of the challenges—or “everyday” traumas—that Acehese face in Jakarta and the ways in which they interact with their performance traditions outside of Aceh, this chapter sheds light on the significance of Acehese performance for Acehese diasporans. This chapter also discusses the shifting meanings of tradition “at home” and in the diaspora, the opportunities available for studying Acehese performance professionally, and the ways in which gender identity influences how Acehese interact with their performance traditions.

While Chapters 3 and 4 focus primarily upon Acehese performance practices as *performances*—that is, presentations of Acehese arts traditions that are held at specific

functions for live audiences—Chapter 5, “Notes from Backstage,” offers my reflections on the significance of *rehearsals*, which provide an opportunity for individuals to practice Acehese performance without the presence of an audience or fear of judgment. My analysis of Acehese dance rehearsals held in Banda Aceh, Sydney, Yogyakarta, and Jakarta suggests that the dynamics of these rehearsals, which tend to be fun, light-hearted, and intimate, may contribute to the efficacy of performance as a tool for addressing trauma. This chapter also draws upon my experiences using Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed” methodologies with teen survivors of domestic violence and teen dating violence in Los Angeles, California. Chapter 5 thus examines the relationship between trauma, performance, and gender from my perspective as a participant-observer in dance and theater rehearsals.

My final chapter, “Looking Back, Moving Forward: Reflections on Trauma, Gender, and Acehese Performance,” synthesizes my primary research findings regarding the role of traditional Acehese dance, music, and theater as a mechanism for resisting trauma. This chapter also examines future possibilities of using Acehese performance to address trauma, oppression, or other concerns within Acehese communities. Although most of the performance-based trauma recovery activities discussed in Chapter 3 have ended, several Acehese individuals and organizations have continued to use traditional performance as a means to enact social change. Chapter 6 reflects on these efforts and raises questions for conducting future research on the significance of traditional performance for Acehese communities today.

## CHAPTER 1

### Histories of Acehnese Identity

Every time I travel to Indonesia I am confronted with the same three questions, usually presented in the same order. First: “*Dari mana, Miss?*” (“Where are you from?”) Next: “*Bisa bahasa Indonesia?*” (“Can you speak Indonesian?”) And finally: “*Sudah menikah?*” (“Are you married?”). These are the questions that taxi drivers, customs officials, hotel staff, waiters and waitresses, café patrons, teachers, students, and anyone else I encounter inevitably pose in order to find out who I am. In other words, it is these three facts—my nationality, my ability to speak Indonesian, and my marital status—that, for so many Indonesians, defines me.

I had developed a habit of internally scoffing at these questions—as if my identity could be summed up so easily! And yet, there was also something appealing about the idea that such a daunting, philosophical question—who am I?—could be boiled down to just a few elements. For one, it was convenient. It relieved me of the task of sifting through my own never-ending list of self-descriptors and gave my interrogators an idea of how to proceed with our conversation. (My answers usually signaled that we could discuss President Obama or my significant other in their native tongue.) Also, strangely enough, it made me feel as though I had a firmer grasp on who I was. In America, I could be anything or anyone: a daughter, a sister, a student, a woman, a young woman, a white woman, a woman who grew up in Massachusetts but now lives in California, a musician, a writer, a researcher—the list goes on. But in Indonesia, it was more straight-forward: I am American, I speak Indonesian and, as of my last trip to the archipelago, I am married.

Of course, I would be disappointed and possibly offended if anyone assumed that this was *all* there was to me, that there was nothing beyond these three facets of my identity. Yet, I realized that there were certain benefits to having a more concise narrative at hand. I also

realized that with each visit to Indonesia, this narrative of myself grew stronger. Before long, I too began to conceive of my identity in these terms.

My goal in this chapter is to discuss Acehnese identity with this realization in mind. As I will show, Acehnese identity has been defined by two primary characteristics—heroic self-reliance and exceptional devotion to Islam. Both of these traits have their basis in actual historical events; however, they certainly are not the *only* way to understand Acehnese identity, nor are they always accurate labels. Nevertheless, historians, journalists, academics, travelers, and Acehnese from all levels of society have continued to perpetuate this narrative.

The notion that Acehnese are particularly heroic and independent warriors who are inclined to resist foreign influence has appeared in countless materials about Aceh and is usually described in the same way. Edward Aspinall refers to this quality as “heroic struggle for self-preservation.”<sup>1</sup> For Elizabeth Drexler, “The pride, bravery, and rebelliousness of the Acehnese are now both cultural attribute and historical fact.”<sup>2</sup> In light of Aceh’s recent separatist struggle against Jakarta, some scholars have interpreted this aspect of Acehnese identity as signs of inherent rebelliousness, or Aceh’s “unruly and independent spirit.”<sup>3</sup> While Bertrand considers Aceh to be “one of the most rebellious regions of Indonesia,”<sup>4</sup> Shaharom describes it as “a restive province with a brave and hard-headed people.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Aspinall, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth F. Drexler, *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Reid, “The Pre-modern Sultanate’s View of its Place in the World,” in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamed Hatta Shaharom, *Tsunami... Grief Beyond Tears: Notes on a Humanitarian Journey in Aceh, Indonesia and North Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2006), 23.

The second trait that is most commonly used to define Acehese identity is an unparalleled and unwavering devotion to Islam. Aspinall's observations ring true to my own when he writes, "Both Acehese citizens and scholars conventionally frame Acehese identity in terms of Islam. This identification is summed up in endlessly repeated phrases like 'Aceh is identical with Islam,' 'Islam and Aceh are two sides of the same coin,' and 'Islam is in the blood and bones of the Acehese.' No Acehese person I have met—whether orthodox religious scholar, military officer, GAM leader, or secularly inclined nongovernmental organization activist—questions this basic identification of Aceh with Islam."<sup>6</sup> In some cases, Acehese Islam has been characterized as particularly conservative, fanatical, or violent. However, Acehese often point proudly to this aspect of their identity to distinguish themselves from other Indonesians.

These dominant ideas about Acehese identity have significantly influenced depictions of Acehese women and gender relations in Aceh. For example, Acehese women are frequently portrayed as "warrior queens"<sup>7</sup> whose independent spirit and leadership capabilities have contributed to Aceh's past and present successes. At the same time, Acehese women have been positioned at the opposite end of "the woman warrior or the woman victim"<sup>8</sup> binary, particularly within interpretations of Acehese Islam as a conservative or violent practice. Seen in this light, Acehese women appear as voiceless victims forced to endure the oppressive policies of religious leaders or the *syariah* (Islamic) police.

This chapter examines the historical basis of such characterizations of Acehese identity and is concerned with three primary questions. First, where have these prevailing views of

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<sup>6</sup> Aspinall, *Islam and Nation*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2009), 50.

<sup>8</sup> Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman, "Introduction: Gender and Conflict in a Global Context," in *Sites of Violence*, eds. Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 16.



Acehnese identity come from? That is, what historical events and actors have supported the notion that Acehnese are heroic and independent warriors as well as devout, and potentially violent, Muslims? Second, what other ideas about Acehnese identity—what other histories—exist outside of this “master” narrative? Finally, if this dominant narrative is not always accurate and presents only a limited understanding of Acehnese identity, why does it continue to exist? Why and for whom is it significant that Acehnese are portrayed along these lines?

In order to address these questions, I have divided the chapter into three sections. In the first section, I offer a brief overview of Acehnese history that aims to introduce readers to key events and people within Aceh’s past. Next, I examine how this same history has been reconstructed in ways that support the dominant view of Acehnese identity. I also present an alternative reading that illuminates the gaps or contradictions within this narrative. In the final section, I offer my own analysis of why Acehnese identity continues to be characterized according to the traits of heroic self-reliance and Islamic devotion.

## **BACKGROUND**

Located at the northernmost tip of the island of Sumatra, Aceh has long occupied a strategic position within international trade and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century served as a major trading center for Indian, Chinese, and Arab merchants. Acehnese exchanged not only material goods, but also ideas and cultural practices; as a result, Aceh was the first region in Indonesia to embrace Islam, a relationship that began as early as the thirteenth century. By 1520, Aceh’s first sultan, Sultan Ali Mughayat Syah, enforced Islam within the region.<sup>9</sup> For Syed M. Naguib Al-Attas, a prominent Muslim philosopher and historian, Aceh in 1590 was, “the intellectual and

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony Reid, “Introduction,” in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 10.

spiritual centre of Islam in the Malay world at that time.”<sup>10</sup> Known as “*serambi Mekkah*,” or, “verandah of Mecca,”<sup>11</sup> Aceh was also instrumental in assisting the spread of Islam throughout the archipelago. Today, Indonesia is 86% Muslim.

Throughout the sixteenth century Aceh was engaged in frequent battles with the Portuguese, who occupied Melaka on the Malay peninsula, and with the Bataks of North Sumatra for control over Sumatra’s trading ports. Acehnese were largely successful in these battles and significantly expanded their empire down the Sumatran coast. However, Sultan ‘Ala u’-d-Din Ri’ayat Shah Sayyid al-Mukammil (r.1589-1604) slowed Aceh’s expansion in 1590.<sup>12</sup>

The following decades, namely 1607-1636, have been referred to as Aceh’s “Golden Age,” coinciding with the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda. Iskandar Muda resumed Aceh’s empire expansion and enjoyed significant wealth from the territory’s pepper and gold exports.<sup>13</sup> The Sultan also took an interest in strengthening Aceh’s legal system and promoting Aceh as a center of Islamic learning. After Sultan Iskandar Muda’s death, Aceh entered into a sixty-year period of female rule, beginning with Sultana Taj al-‘Alam Safiyat al-Din Shah, Iskandar Muda’s daughter. These four queens did not pursue the same expansionist policies, and by the end of the seventeenth century Aceh’s territorial boundaries extended only as far south as Barus.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Painan Treaty of 1663 gave the Dutch a monopoly over the pepper trade, thus weakening Aceh’s control over its ports.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Riddell, “Aceh in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: ‘*Serambi Mekkah*’ and Identity,” in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Kell, *The Roots of Acehnese Rebellion, 1989-1992* (New York: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1995), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Reid, *Contest for North Sumatra: Atjeh, the Netherland and Britain, 1858-98* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Kell, *The Roots of Acehnese Rebellion*, 5.

As the sultanate grew weaker, Aceh's *uleebalang* (territorial chiefs) began to deal independently with European and North American traders.<sup>16</sup> This independence was challenged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, as Acehnese became more directly involved in negotiations with the British and the Dutch. In the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, the two European powers divided the Malay archipelago between them, with the British taking control of Malaya (now part of Malaysia) and the Dutch taking the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). As a result of the treaty, Aceh officially fell under Dutch rule. Though the British had stressed in an earlier agreement (1819) that Aceh was independent, they reneged on this promise in the 1871 Treaty of Sumatra, which gave the Netherlands "an entirely free hand in Sumatra."<sup>17</sup>

Mounting tensions between the Dutch and the Acehnese erupted in the Dutch-Aceh War of 1873, which lasted approximately thirty years. Using *uleebalang* to carry out colonial policies, the Dutch eventually defeated the Acehnese in 1903, though Acehnese continued to resist until as late as 1913.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the war, Aceh's *uleebalang* had lost control of their territories and become dependent on Dutch authority, earning them much resentment from fellow Acehnese. As a result, Acehnese transferred their loyalty to a new group, the *ulama* (Islamic scholars), who initiated a religious revival and drew numerous followers to their *madrasah* (Islamic schools) in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>19</sup> Many Acehnese had suffered economically from the collapse of pepper production in the mid-1920s and were attracted to the new religious teachings. This "reformist enthusiasm" in Aceh led to the creation of the All-Aceh *Ulama* Association (PUSA) in 1939.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>17</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 136.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Reid, "Colonial Transformation: A Bitter Legacy," in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 101.

<sup>19</sup> Kell, *The Roots of Acehnese Rebellion*, 8.

When the Japanese invaded Indonesia during World War II, they continued the Dutch practice of using *uleebalang* to run the government and played *uleebalang* against *ulama*. The sudden surrender of the Japanese in 1945 thus left the *uleebalang* without a colonial power to protect them. From December 1946 to January 1947, *ulama* and other social groups in Aceh attacked *uleebalang* in what is known as the Cumbok War.<sup>20</sup> By the end of this “social revolution,” PUSA had gained full political, economic, and military power in Aceh.<sup>21</sup>

The *ulama* who came to power in Aceh during the 1940s had mixed opinions regarding the formation of the new Indonesian Republic, which had declared independence on August 17, 1945. Though many Acehnese “genuinely supported” Indonesian independence,<sup>22</sup> others believed that the new nation should be an Islamic state. In 1953, Daud Beureu’eh, who had served as the first chair of PUSA and Aceh’s governor from 1945-49, led disgruntled Acehnese in the Darul Islam Rebellion, which declared that Aceh was part of *Negara Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic State). The rebellion largely died down in 1959 when Aceh was granted status as a *Daerah Istimewa* (Special Region) with control over its religious, educational, and customary law affairs.<sup>23</sup>

As the Darul Islam Rebellion subsided, Acehnese society enjoyed a decade of relative peace and saw the rise of new social elites, namely “secular intellectuals”<sup>24</sup> who had benefited from educational development in Aceh and were concerned with improving their province. Acehnese also saw an expansion of oil and gas companies, and in the early 1960s companies

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Reid, “Colonial Transformation,” 106.

<sup>23</sup> Michelle Ann Miller, “What’s Special About Special Autonomy in Aceh?” in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 294.

<sup>24</sup> Kell, *The Roots of Acehnese Rebellion*, 11.

such as Pertamina, Mobil Oil, and Exxon took interest in Aceh's natural gas resources.<sup>25</sup> This contributed to the "LNG boom" in the 1970s (liquefied natural gas). By the end of the 1980s, Aceh was contributing thirty percent of Indonesia's oil and gas exports.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the fact that "Aceh's oil wealth could have made the province into Brunei, one of the world's richest states,"<sup>27</sup> Acehnese saw little of this profit. As a result, Aceh's educated middle-class criticized the Suharto government for exploiting their natural resources and failing to adequately compensate Acehnese. Aceh's *ulama* were also dissatisfied with the New Order government, which they felt had become too centralized and failed to fulfill their promise of granting Aceh autonomy over their religious and educational affairs. It was within this environment that Hasan di Tiro, the great-grandson of a prominent Dutch-resistance leader and member of the Acehnese elite, returned to Aceh after spending over twenty years working and studying outside of the country. During his time abroad, Di Tiro had come up with his own formulation for ideal nationhood in Indonesia, which can be described as a "federation with Islam as its base."<sup>28</sup> It was this understanding of nationhood that inspired Aceh's Darul Islam Rebellion in 1953. When Di Tiro returned to Aceh in the mid-1970s, however, he discovered that his vision of Indonesia still had not materialized. Harnessing the discontent that many Acehnese already felt towards the New Order government, Di Tiro began the *Aceh Merdeka* (Free Aceh) movement. He declared that his goal was not simply to break away from the

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<sup>25</sup> M. Isa Sulaiman, "From Autonomy to Periphery: A Critical Evaluation of the Acehnese Nationalist Movement," in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 124-25.

<sup>26</sup> Kell, *The Roots of Acehnese Rebellion*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Gelman-Taylor, *Indonesia: Peoples and Histories* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 365.

<sup>28</sup> Sulaiman, "From Autonomy to Periphery," 131.

Indonesian state, which he designated a “neo-colonist,” but to “restore the sovereignty of Aceh as it was before the Aceh War on 26 March 1873.”<sup>29</sup>

In the early years of the conflict, *Aceh Merdeka* fighters took a largely defensive approach and aimed primarily to harass Indonesian soldiers and build international and local support.<sup>30</sup> Unprepared and unable to strengthen their support networks, the movement floundered and, by 1982, appeared to be defeated.<sup>31</sup> In the next few years, however, Aceh’s guerilla fighters received training in Libya and returned to Aceh as *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (Free Aceh Movement), or GAM. This latter period of the conflict saw greater violence, particularly when the Indonesian government declared Aceh a military operations zone (DOM) from 1989 to 1998, a period characterized by extreme human rights abuses, terror campaigns, and the use of civilians as spies and informers.<sup>32</sup> Despite several peace negotiations with Jakarta and the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in 2003, fighting between GAM rebels and the Indonesian army (TNI) continued until December 2004, when the Indian Ocean tsunami struck Aceh. As a result of the extreme devastation caused by the tsunami, the fighting abated, and on August 15, 2005, GAM officially reached a resolution with the Indonesian government under the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This agreement permitted Acehnese to establish local political parties and addressed key concerns relating to human rights, economic development, and the reintegration of GAM members into Acehnese society.

Since 2005, Aceh has continued to adjust to changes instigated by the tsunami and the peace accord. For example, whereas the province had been closed to foreigners since May 2003,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>30</sup> Kirsten Schulze, “Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency: Strategy and the Aceh Conflict, October 1976-May 2004,” in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey Robinson, “*Rawan* is as *Rawan* Does: The Origins of Disorder in New Order Aceh,” *Indonesia* 66 (October 1998): 131.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 144.

the tsunami drew “a massive international relief operation”<sup>33</sup> as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) flooded into Aceh, with some agencies staying up to five years. In addition to providing food, shelter, and economic support, these agencies also aimed to uphold the peace during Aceh’s first local elections in 2006, in which Irwandi Yusuf, a former GAM member, was elected governor of Aceh. Further, although *syariah* law had been in effect since 2003, the extent to which it has been enforced and its influence upon the lives of Acehnese citizens has varied within Aceh’s eighteen regencies.

## **RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY**

As this overview suggests, Acehnese history has seen periods of peace as well as violence, of moderate religious practice as well as the more stringent application of Islamic values. Nevertheless, Acehnese identity continues to be defined by their “heroic struggle for self-preservation” and their exceptional devotion to Islam. In this section, I examine four periods of Acehnese history that are most frequently interpreted as periods in which these aspects of Acehnese identity are expressed. Alongside the dominant narrative, I also attend to neglected histories and alternative readings. In this way, I suggest that prevailing views of Acehnese identity are neither true nor false; they simply are not enough.

### **The Golden Age (1509 – 1699)**

Aceh’s early history is rife with tales of Acehnese heroism, military greatness, and superior leadership—all of which appear to have been attained through Aceh’s resistance to foreign influence. From 1509 to 1520, for example, the Acehnese sultanate was especially powerful and fought frequent battles in order to expand its empire. According to Peter Riddell, Sultan Ali Mughayat Syah “undertook successful military campaigns against the neighboring

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<sup>33</sup> Aris Ananta and Lee Poh Onn, eds., *Aceh: A New Dawn* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007).

cities of Deli, Pidie, Pasai, and Daya...Acehnese domains in Sumatra continued to expand relentlessly thereafter.”<sup>34</sup> Between 1521 and 1575, Aceh’s sultans fought the Portuguese for control over Melaka and waged war with the kingdoms of Johor and Perak.<sup>35</sup> For some scholars, these early battles identify Aceh as an independent, self-reliant empire. Anthony Reid explains, “this motif of resisting foreign interference continued to provide a *raison d’etre* for the sultanate through the centuries that followed. It marked Aceh as sharply different, not only from the semi-stateless Batak and Minangkabau populations of the highlands, but also from the world of Malay rulers.”<sup>36</sup>

The reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636) has also been viewed as a pivotal moment in Acehnese history that defines Acehnese character. Through his “brilliant economic and military strategy, ruthless suppression of internal dissent, and support for the popular *wujuddiya* school of Islamic mysticism,” Iskandar Muda transformed Aceh into “probably the wealthiest and most powerful state in the archipelago.”<sup>37</sup> The Sultan also strengthened Aceh’s legal system, promoted Acehnese literature, and encouraged Acehnese scholars to visit Arabia.<sup>38</sup> As a result of these accomplishments, Iskandar Muda became “an Acehnese culture hero and symbol of vanished greatness.”<sup>39</sup>

The Golden Age also marks the beginnings of Aceh’s purportedly long-standing and unwavering devotion to Islam. In addition to Aceh’s status as the first region in the Indonesian archipelago to have received Islam, Acehnese are also proud to claim that their sultans strengthened and spread Islam throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a fact that is

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<sup>34</sup> Riddell, “Aceh in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” 39.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-41.

<sup>36</sup> Reid, “Introduction,” 12.

<sup>37</sup> Anthony Reid, ed., *Witnesses to Sumatra: A Travellers’ Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 54.

<sup>38</sup> Riddell, “Aceh in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” 44-45.

<sup>39</sup> Reid, *Witnesses to Sumatra*, 64.



illustrated in the writings of cultural observers at that time. For example, in 1641 Nur al-Din al-Riniri noted, “Truly this state of Aceh Daru’s-Salam is the very verandah of God’s most honoured city of Mecca.”<sup>40</sup> William Dampier, an English privateer, echoed this sentiment in his observations from 1688, claiming, “There are but a few of them resort daily to their *Mosques*, yet they are all stiff in their Religion, and so zealous for it, that they greatly rejoice in making a Proselyte.”<sup>41</sup>

Alongside the notion that Acehnese are exceptionally devout, however, is an understanding of Acehnese Islam as conservative, fanatical, or violent. Some historians have suggested that Aceh’s early battles with the Batak and other Sumatrans were fought, at least in part, in defense of their “brand of militant Islam”<sup>42</sup> and to convert their “infidel neighbors.”<sup>43</sup> C. Snoucke Hurgronje, a Dutch colonial scholar, also observed, “From Mohammedanism (which for centuries she [Acheh] is reputed to have accepted) she really only learnt a large number of dogmas relating to hatred of the infidel without any of their mitigating concomitants; so that the Acehnese made a regular business of piracy and man-hunting at the expense of the neighbouring non-Mohammedan countries and islands, and considered that they were justified in any act of treachery or violence to European (and latterly to American) traders who came in search of pepper.”<sup>44</sup> In this view, Acehnese Islam condones violence and has inspired Acehnese to wage war with their non-Muslim neighbors.

Finally, the roles of Acehnese women during this time have served as further evidence that military heroism and skillful leadership are distinctive Acehnese traits. For example,

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<sup>40</sup> Riddell, “Aceh in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” 39.

<sup>41</sup> Reid, *Witnesses to Sumatra*, 112.

<sup>42</sup> Reid, *Witnesses to Sumatra*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Teuku Ibrahim Alfian, “Aceh and the Holy War (*Prang Sabil*),” in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 110.

<sup>44</sup> C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Acehnese*, vol. 1, trans. A.W.S. O’Sullivan (Leyden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill Publishers, 1906), vii.

women were actively involved in early battles against the Dutch Navy and served in the armada created by Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah IV (1589-1604). According to Shaharom, “This armada was called *Armada Inong Bale* (Armada of the Widows) and it was led by a female leader, Admiral Malahayati, who successfully foiled the attempts of the Dutch Navy under the leadership of Cornelis and Frederick Houtman to subdue Aceh in 1599.”<sup>45</sup> Acehnese women also served as political leaders during this period, and from 1641 to 1699, four successive queens, or sultanas, ruled Aceh. Accounts from this period suggest that Aceh continued to enjoy prosperity under female rule, as Aceh “appears to have been a wealthy city and state congenial for commerce.”<sup>46</sup> Thomas Bowery, an English trader who documented his observations of social attitudes towards the sultanas, also found, “They all in Generall were Satisfied that a Queen had Governed them soe longe and in peace. I was then in Achin when She died, and saw a generall mourning for her.”<sup>47</sup> Other observations of women’s roles during this period identify Acehnese women as guards of the sultan, a position of relatively high status. According to François Martin, a French merchant who traveled to Aceh in 1602, “The King is sixty-three years old, and has reigned eighteen years...His guard consists of women who carry a sword and arquebus and are as skilful as the men. All his household staff are women, and no man comes near him.”<sup>48</sup> These accounts suggest that Acehnese women were considered to be as capable of occupying leadership positions as men. Further, through their military and political leadership, Acehnese women directly contributed to the prosperity of Aceh’s empire during the Golden Age.

### ***Revisiting: The Golden Age***

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<sup>45</sup> Shaharom, *Tsunami...Grief Beyond Tears*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Reid, *Witnesses to Sumatra*, 54.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

To be sure, Aceh enjoyed considerable prosperity for much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and certainly the bravery of Acehnese warriors and the policies of Aceh's rulers contributed to the empire's early successes. However, this narrative presents only one way of viewing these early events. Closer examination reveals that Acehnese were not always independent of foreign influence, nor were they the only ethnic group in the archipelago to express an early Islamic devotion. Evidence that Acehnese women were excluded from leadership roles and occupied multiple subject positions also presents a challenge to this dominant narrative.

In contrast to the image of Acehnese as an "unruly and independent" people who actively resisted foreign influence, other histories have suggested that Acehnese imagined themselves as belonging to a variety of communities, and at times, actively nurtured peaceful foreign relations rather than destroying or preventing them. Positioned at the center of a trade network with Arab, Indian, Chinese, and European traders, it is likely that Acehnese envisioned themselves as part of a larger Malay network at this time and fought against the Portuguese, not because of an inclination for aggression and independence, but as a means to develop this "Malay-focused political identity," enabling the sultan to rule both sides of the Straits of Melaka.<sup>49</sup> According to Peter Riddell, after numerous failed attempts to oust the Portuguese from this post, Aceh began to develop a Pan-Islamic identity that mirrored Mecca.<sup>50</sup>

Aceh's contact with the Ottoman Empire during this time also reveals a degree of dependency and an interest in developing peaceful relations with other Islamic regions, rather than a desire to remain independent. During the reign of Sultan Alau'ddin Ri'ayat Syah al-Kahar (1539-71), for example, "a commercial and military alliance was forged between Aceh and

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<sup>49</sup> Riddell, "Aceh in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," 47.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

Ottoman Turkey, which shared Aceh's economic stake in the Muslim pepper route through the Red Sea and Cairo. As well as helping Aceh in its assaults on Malacca, the arms and men from Turkey were used in a series of crusades against the Batak and other Sumatrans."<sup>51</sup> From his examination of Aceh's relations with the Ottoman Empire during this time, Reid concludes, "it seems clear that the earlier Turkish assistance around 1563 had assisted Aceh's campaigns against Aru and Johor (relative friends of the Portuguese) the following year, and encouraged planning for a more ambitious assault on Melaka."<sup>52</sup> Aceh's interest in developing a Pan-Islamic identity and strengthening relations with the Ottoman Empire thus suggests that Acehnese not only nurtured foreign relations but also depended upon these contacts for imperial success.

Second, although Islam first arrived in Indonesia through Aceh, Aceh was not alone as a center of Islam during this time. According to Rossler, "South Sulawesi—and in particular the kingdom of Gowa formerly located in this region—has long been regarded as one of the main centers of Islam in the Malay archipelago... The region has played a significant role in the history of Islam in Indonesia, both in earlier times and in the modern republican era."<sup>53</sup> Not surprisingly, this has led to the belief that since the arrival of Islam in Gowa in 1605, the Makassar people of South Sulawesi "have been renowned for their strict adherence to Islamic faith."<sup>54</sup>

Finally, evidence of Acehnese women actively participating in and contributing to the success of the Acehnese empire at this time must be viewed alongside other accounts of Acehnese women's roles during the Golden Age. The fact that four Acehnese women served as

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<sup>51</sup> Reid, *Witnesses to Sumatra*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Anthony Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier: Acehnese and other Histories of Sumatra* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), 83.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Rossler, "Islamization and the Reshaping of Identities in Rural South Sulawesi," in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatich (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 276.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

queens in Aceh from 1641 to 1699 does not necessarily indicate that these and other Acehnese women were viewed as equals by their male counterparts, nor does it explain exactly how powerful these sultanas were. According to Reid, “although the first of Aceh’s four queens, Taj al-Alam (1641-75), was still strong and respected, this was less true of each of her successors in turn... the Sultana Safiyyat ad-Din Taj al-Alam Syah (1641-75) had much less power *vis-à-vis* the half dozen most powerful men of the realm than did her father.”<sup>55</sup> Shaharom’s understanding of this period also runs counter to the notion that Acehnese women were trusted and respected in such positions of power, as “all of these Sultannahs...were constantly counseled by a group of male Muslim scholars.”<sup>56</sup> Further, because Aceh’s male religious leaders believed that female rule was un-Islamic, they obtained a letter from Mecca in 1699, which “[forbid] female rule as contrary to Islam.”<sup>57</sup> As a result, this sixty-year period of female rule was brought to an end.

In emphasizing the degree to which Acehnese women fit the label of the “warrior queen,” the dominant narrative of Aceh’s Golden Age fails to address other subject positions that Acehnese women occupied at this time. During his travels to Aceh in 1602, François Martin observed, “when strangers come to this place, they buy women for as much time as they want to stay there, without the women being shocked by this...Men buy for money all their household—women, servants and slaves—and get rid of them when it suits them. Each man has concubines and sells them when he likes.”<sup>58</sup> William Dampier’s observations from 1688 also contradict ideas about Acehnese women’s relatively high status during this time. Dampier wrote, “the Money-changers also are Slaves, and in general all the Women that you see in the streets; not

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<sup>55</sup> Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier*, 144, 148.

<sup>56</sup> Shaharom, *Tsunami...Grief Beyond Tears*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier*, 109-10.

<sup>58</sup> Reid, *Witnesses to Sumatra*, 58.

one of them being free.”<sup>59</sup> In this sense, the experiences of a few Acehese women who held positions of power as warriors, sultanas, or guards to the sultan do not represent the experiences of all Acehese women during this period.

### **The Dutch-Aceh War (1873-1903)**

Aceh’s association with heroism and military greatness continues into the colonial period, as Aceh is known for having provided “fierce resistance” to Dutch colonizers who entered Aceh in April 1873. According to Reid, the Dutch arrived in Banda Aceh, “in appalling ignorance of what they might expect.”<sup>60</sup> Holland suffered immediate defeat and planned a second invasion one month later. Thus began thirty years of fighting, in which the Dutch faced “fierce, albeit sporadic and decentralized, resistance led by local chiefs, religious leaders, and adventurers.”<sup>61</sup> Aspinall also notes, “By the late nineteenth century, some foreign observers were already calling this conflict ‘the longest war of the nineteenth century’ and speaking of the ‘daring and apparently invincible Achinese.’”<sup>62</sup> Although Aceh’s prominent resistance leaders, Sultan Daud and Panglima Polem, formally submitted to the Dutch in 1903, Aceh’s continued resistance, which constituted “Southeast Asia’s first successful guerilla strategy against modern European arms,” as well as the strategy of *Aceh-moord*, or, suicidal attacks on Dutchmen, extended the fighting until 1913.<sup>63</sup> This has led some historians to claim that the Dutch-Aceh War “had no formal conclusion”<sup>64</sup> and offers additional evidence of the “bravery and rebelliousness”<sup>65</sup> of Acehese.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>60</sup> Reid, “Colonial Transformation: A Bitter Legacy,” 97.

<sup>61</sup> Aspinall, *Islam and Nation*, 24.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 99-103.

<sup>64</sup> For example, Siegel comments, “Because the war had no formal conclusion, it is not possible to say precisely when it ended.” See: James Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 5.

Analyses of Aceh's fighting tactics within the Dutch-Aceh War have also supported the idea that Acehnese Islam is particularly violent. Not only did Acehnese conceive of this war as a "holy war," but it has been claimed that acts of *Aceh-moord* were "inspired by hatred toward unbelievers."<sup>66</sup> Teuku Ibrahim Alfian also argues that before engaging in acts of violence, Acehnese consulted the *Hikayat Perang Sabil (HPS)* or "Holy War Tales," which describes in great detail the rewards that will be bestowed upon Acehnese who participate in Holy War.<sup>67</sup> Alfian explains, "The *Hikayat* appears to have been effective in stimulating men, women and children to go to war, even against overwhelmingly superior weapons."<sup>68</sup> For this reason, the Dutch confiscated and burned all copies of the *HPS*, finding it "extremely dangerous."<sup>69</sup> Much like depictions of Acehnese Islam during the Golden Age, these accounts of the Dutch-Aceh War suggest that Acehnese Islam inspires acts of extreme violence.

Finally, Acehnese women are not exempt from accounts of Acehnese bravery and resistance to Dutch colonialism; instead, they are counted among Aceh's anti-colonial heroes. Shaharom observes, "Women played an extremely significant role during Aceh's wars with the colonial Dutch. Thousands became warriors and martyrs, and the best among them became commanders and admirals in their own right."<sup>70</sup> However, two women in particular—Cut Nyack Dhien and Cut Meutia—have made their mark in Acehnese history as outstanding women warriors. After her husband, Teuku Umar, was killed in battle in 1898, Cut Nyack Dhien continued the struggle, leading guerilla troops in resistance attacks until her capture in 1905. Cut Meutia also emerged as a war heroine, serving as a commander of Acehnese fighters when she

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<sup>65</sup> Drexler, *Aceh, Indonesia*, 57.

<sup>66</sup> Alfian, "Aceh and the Holy War," 114.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Shaharom, *Tsunami...Grief Beyond Tears*, 22.

too became a widow. Both women have been named national heroes of Indonesia and have appeared in, or been the subject of, numerous historical films. In addition, many of Aceh's educational and medical institutions have been named after these "women warriors."<sup>71</sup>

### ***Revisiting: The Dutch-Aceh War***

Although Acehnese men and women certainly provided fierce resistance to Dutch colonization and though they did consult Islamic texts to augment their fighting spirit, the extent to which these actions define Acehnese character deserves further consideration.

For example, despite the view that Acehnese were exceptionally heroic in fending off Dutch colonization during the Dutch-Aceh War, Acehnese were not alone in this endeavor; the Javanese resisted Dutch colonialism during the Diponegoro War (1825-1830), and the Minangkabau of West Sumatra challenged Dutch rule during the Padri War (1821-1837). Perhaps even more surprising given the popular representation of Balinese as a "peaceful and harmonious" people,<sup>72</sup> Balinese also fought to stave off Dutch influence and have been described as "the most formidable military opponents ever encountered by the Dutch colonial forces in the Indies."<sup>73</sup>

Second, although it is true that some Acehnese have viewed their battles as "holy wars," and depicted their enemies as "*kafir*" (unbelievers), this does not indicate that Acehnese Islam has always been used to inspire violence or that all Acehnese saw a connection between Islam and war. For example, although the term "*jihad*" is often interpreted as "holy war," it more accurately translates as "struggle" or, "to exert oneself as much as one can...to struggle to the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), xi.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 23.



utmost of one's capacity."<sup>74</sup> This struggle can exist as a struggle against oneself, a struggle against the devil, or even educational struggle; in other words, *jihad* is not always, nor is it necessarily, violent. Moreover, James Siegel has observed that, in Acehese society at this time, Islam was practiced in different ways by different groups of Acehese, including *ulama*, *ulebelang*, and villagers. Siegel writes, "there was general agreement that Atjeh was an Islamic society that enabled the groups to live side by side, although each of them had different conceptions of the nature of both Atjeh and Islam."<sup>75</sup> Because "the meanings of 'Atjehese' and 'Islam' were not agreed upon by all groups within Atjeh,"<sup>76</sup> the use of Islam to inspire violence at this time should be viewed as a strategy for mobilizing Acehese against the Dutch rather than a consistent practice in which all Acehese engaged. Fritz Schulze observes, "in the course of the war, the *ulama* established a network which allowed them to communicate and to make the *dayah* and mosques places of political propaganda and a focus of their political power. By entering into a holy war against the infidel intruders, the *ulama* transformed religion into a highly political issue."<sup>77</sup>

The dominant narratives about Acehese women's roles during this period also demand revision. While women like Cut Nyak Dhien are certainly important figures within Acehese history, they are praised for their military prowess, their ruthlessness, and their willingness to fight violently on behalf of Acehese. In this sense, these women are notable only to the extent that they "act like men," showing bravery and acting to protect others when confronted with

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<sup>74</sup> Alfian, "Aceh and the Holy War," 109.

<sup>75</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 69.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>77</sup> Fritz Schulze, "From Colonial Times to Revolution and Integration," in *Aceh: History, Politics and Culture*, eds. Arndt Graf, Susanne Schröter, Edwin Wieringa (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publishing, 2010), 64-65.

danger.<sup>78</sup> This suggests that Acehese women who escaped with their families or submitted to Dutch authority are insignificant within Acehese histories. Clavé-Çelik also argues that an over-emphasis on women like Cut Nyak Dhien presents a romanticized and limited view of Acehese women's contributions to the Dutch-Aceh War. Clavé-Çelik explains, "Acehese heroines of the 19th [and 20<sup>th</sup>] centur[ies], Cut Nyak Dhien and Cut Meutia, are similarly presented as continuing the fight of their dead husbands, sometimes exceeding them in passion and constancy. By providing very few details on their life and personality, a uniform image of the archetypical Acehese woman combatant has been perpetuated. This bias, present since the first romanticised Dutch accounts, has created a simplified history made up of one-dimensional icons. As a result, romanced stories of a few select figures have become the sole historical reference points of Acehese women warriors in general."<sup>79</sup> In this way, "symbolic" women like Cut Nyak Dhien are praised for their contributions while "real" women are excluded from history and dominant constructions of Acehese identity.

### **Religious Reforms and The Darul Islam Rebellion (1920-1959)**

The period following the Dutch-Aceh war saw an increase in religious reforms, the development of PUSA, and the Darul Islam movement. These events, as well as Acehese attitudes towards the struggle for Indonesian independence, have been interpreted as further evidence that Acehese have a particularly strong relationship to Islam and wish to be free from outside rule (whether by the Dutch, the Japanese, or Indonesians themselves). Some scholars have also viewed the Darul Islam movement as evidence that Acehese Islam is associated with acts of violence.

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<sup>78</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>79</sup> Elsa Clavé-Çelik, "Images of the Past, Realities of the Present: Aceh's Inong Balee," *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* 48 (Summer 2008): 10-11.

Following the Dutch-Aceh War, Aceh's *ulama*, who had come to replace the *uleebalang* as social leaders, were faced with "a modernizing colonial society," and in the late 1920s instituted a series of religious reforms in order to maintain control.<sup>80</sup> Similar reforms occurred in other parts of Indonesia and resulted in the creation of the nation-wide Muslim organizations Sarekat Islam and Muhammadiyah. However, Acehnese were reluctant to join these organizations, and within Aceh Sarekat Islam and Muhammadiyah were supported "almost exclusively by non-Acehnese residents and a sprinkling of these westernized *uleebalang*."<sup>81</sup> The fact that these nation-wide organizations did not find support in Aceh has been interpreted as further evidence that Aceh is inherently distinct from the rest of the Dutch East Indies in its practice of Islam. Fritz Schulze explains, "although the Muhammadiyah was founded in 1912 as a unitary organization for the whole of the Dutch East Indies, the Acehnese *ulama* did not integrate themselves into that organization but, instead, chose their own way. This circumstance alone shows that the Acehnese regarded themselves as separate and not as an integral part of the colony. The influence of the Muhammadiyah was restricted to the bigger towns in Aceh, especially Kutaraja. The same was true for the Sarekat Islam, which also could not take root in Aceh."<sup>82</sup>

In 1939 Acehnese formed their own organization for *ulama* called PUSA (*Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh*), which declared itself "the voice of the Acehnese people."<sup>83</sup> Although PUSA leaders were critical of and actively opposed the Dutch colonial government, they were equally condemnatory of Aceh's own *uleebalang*, and thus were not considered to be part of the national Indonesian movement. However, following the Japanese invasion of the Dutch East

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<sup>80</sup> Schulze, "From Colonial Times to Revolution and Integration," 64.

<sup>81</sup> Anthony Reid, *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 124.

<sup>82</sup> Schulze, "From Colonial Times to Revolution and Integration," 65.

<sup>83</sup> Reid, *Imperial Alchemy*, 125.

Indies in 1941, some Acehnese *ulama* showed support for Indonesian nationalists and Sukarno, the proposed leader of the new republic. In October of 1945, four of Aceh's leading *ulama* issued the following declaration: "Every segment of the population has united in obedience, to stand behind the great leader Ir Soekarno, to await whatever commands or obligations are put before them. It is our firm conviction that this struggle is a sacred struggle which is called a HOLY WAR (*Perang Sabil*). Believe therefore, fellow-country-men, that this struggle is like a continuation of the former struggle in Aceh which was led by the late Peungko Cik di Tiro and other national heroes."<sup>84</sup> For some, this declaration suggests that Acehnese *ulama* only supported Indonesian independence as an extension of Acehnese independence and not out of a desire to become integrated into an Indonesian state. Reid explains, "Supporting the Indonesian Republic had appeared the heaven-sent channel to achieve the goals of the *ulama*-led populism of PUSA, to be rid of outside rule, both Dutch and Japanese, at the same time as destroying their *ulèëbalang* rivals."<sup>85</sup> In this sense, PUSA's support for Indonesian independence can be seen as an expression of an Acehnese desire for self-rule.

Other sources, however, suggest that Acehnese were largely unsupportive of Indonesian independence, as they feared that those in charge of the new republican government would merely replace the Dutch as colonizers who threatened Acehnese autonomy. For Schulze, "nationalism [in Aceh] was comparatively weak and had been mainly employed as a means of unifying the people against colonial rule and to help them become a free people with a firm desire for self-determination. Nobody in Aceh was prepared to drown in a unitary state dominated by Java or secular values."<sup>86</sup> The fear that Aceh would now be "colonized" by the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 127-28.

<sup>86</sup> Schulze, "From Colonial Times to Revolution and Integration," 74.

new Jakarta government resurged when, in 1950, less than a year after Indonesia became an independent federal republic, the central government formed a committee to plan the integration of Aceh into a new, larger province called North Sumatra. Schulze writes, “all efforts were concentrated on turning [Indonesia] into a unitary state. Aceh had to play its role in this ruling enforced by Jakarta. This concept left no room for autonomy or regional identity...the nationalist-dominated central government was suspicious of the religion-dominated Aceh province.”<sup>87</sup> Three years later, the Darul Islam rebellion broke out in Aceh.

According to some versions of Acehnese history, the Darul Islam rebellion emerged because Acehnese—as devout Muslims—were dissatisfied with the secular character of the new Republican government. For Daud Beureu’eh, “the Government of the Republic of Indonesia that now exists is not the Government we fought for in 1945...What it really is now is a *Hindi Government wearing a Nationalist shirt and very much resembling Communism*...As well as being anti-Islam and anti-God, they also hold as their enemies those Indonesians who are Muslims, especially the Acehnese.”<sup>88</sup> After announcing in 1953 that all of Aceh was part of *Negara Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic State), as opposed to the new Republican government, Beureu’eh mobilized followers and began to attack security posts, government offices and *uleebalang*, viewing the struggle as a “holy war” and imposing “a tithe...on those who were not fighting, and a death sentence to whomever he felt was harming the struggle.”<sup>89</sup> According to Michelle Ann Miller, Acehnese Islamic identity was formed through this rhetoric of “holy war” and in opposition to practitioners of a more moderate, or less pronounced, Islam. Miller writes, “The Acehnese leaders of the Darul Islam revolt justified violence by portraying

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Edward Aspinall, “Violence and Identity Formation in Aceh under Indonesian Rule,” in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 154.

<sup>89</sup> Sulaiman, “From Autonomy to Periphery,” 130.

their enemies as *kafir* (infidels) and emphasizing the un-Islamic character of the Indonesian state and its ‘anti-Islamic’ activities.”<sup>90</sup> Major Fujiwara Iwaichi, the chief of intelligence for the Japanese army, echoed this view in his memoirs from 1944: “The people of Aceh are very committed Muslims, to the point that in the name of Islam they will endure warfare and even death.”<sup>91</sup> This narrative suggests that Acehnese uniformly opposed the Republican government as a result of their exceptional devotion to Islam. It also supports the idea that Acehnese are willing to resort to violence in defense of their Islamic identity.

Little has been written about the status of women in Aceh during this period; however, some scholars have suggested that women in Aceh were treated as equals during the period of religious reforms. In her examination of John Bowen’s research on the Gayo people of central Aceh, Barbara Metcalf argues that Acehnese Islam is inclusive to women and respects women’s voices and opinions. Metcalf explains, “Bowen’s study of reform in Gayo... finds—surprisingly, given our stereotypes about Islam and women—that women and men are conceptualized as essentially identical, open to the same kind of teaching, responsible for the same kind of behavior... In Gayo, women were apparently not only invited to participate in the reformist religious style, but were themselves among the poets who spread the teachings.”<sup>92</sup> This analysis lends credence to the view that Acehnese Islam does not oppress or restrict women in Aceh, but instead views women as equal to men.

### ***Revisiting: Religious Reforms and The Darul Islam Rebellion***

A more comprehensive analysis of the religious reforms and the Darul Islam rebellion, however, reveals other ways of understanding Acehnese Islamic identity and gender relations

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<sup>90</sup> Miller, “What’s Special About Special Autonomy in Aceh?” 293-94.

<sup>91</sup> Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier*, 285.

<sup>92</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, “Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia: History, Community, Morality,” in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatic (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 317-18.

during this time. First, the Darul Islam rebellion was not unique to Aceh. Originating in West Java in 1942, the movement attracted individuals who desired a greater Islamic influence within the Indonesian government, and emerged not only in Aceh, but also in South Sulawesi. Second, although many Acehnese may have joined the Darul Islam rebellion for religious reasons, Acehnese were also frustrated with the Jakarta government due to the presence of non-Muslim, non-Acehnese workers and military troops,<sup>93</sup> and the redrawing of Aceh's boundaries in 1951, which merged Aceh into the province of North Sumatra and prevented Acehnese from receiving revenue from their local government.<sup>94</sup> Daud Beuereu'eh took advantage of this dissatisfaction to form the Darul Islam movement and resist the newly created Indonesian government.

It is important to note that although many Acehnese were frustrated with the Jakarta government for a variety of reasons, there were also a large number of Acehnese who "were profoundly committed to the Republic."<sup>95</sup> This commitment is evidenced in the fact that Aceh became the site of Indonesia's temporary government when the Dutch attempted to reclaim their colony in 1948-49. Bertrand explains, "when the Republican government was forced to retreat because of the advances of the returning Dutch, the Acehnese formed a strong regional government and represented one of the Republic's strongholds."<sup>96</sup> Other scholars have described Aceh as "a model of outward loyalty to the central government,"<sup>97</sup> a view that directly contrasts depictions of Acehnese as independent and self-reliant. In addition, Acehnese businessmen offered financial support for the new Republican government. After President Sukarno visited

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<sup>93</sup> Miller, "What's Special About Special Autonomy in Aceh?" 293.

<sup>94</sup> Sulaiman, "From Autonomy to Periphery," 130.

<sup>95</sup> Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, 163.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier*, 316.

Banda Aceh in 1948, Acehese merchants collected enough money to purchase two airplanes, which were donated to the new government on behalf of the Acehese people.<sup>98</sup>

The violence that emerged during the Darul Islam rebellion also deserves further consideration. For example, evidence of Acehese Islamic scholars actively avoiding and condemning violence suggests that Islam is not always, nor necessarily, militant in Aceh. The actions taken by Daud Beureu'eh during the Darul Islam rebellion, in which he imposed a tithe on non-fighters and “a death sentence to whomever he felt was harming the struggle,” did not represent the views of all Islamic scholars, and, far from it, “such violence was opposed by the *ulama* and other religious leaders who were previously in power.”<sup>99</sup> Some *ulama* were so strongly opposed to the violence committed by Muslims during the Darul Islam rebellion that they issued *fatwas*, proclaiming that fighting against a legal government was forbidden.<sup>100</sup> That *jihad* is not necessarily linked with violent struggle but encompasses broader meanings, and that “traditional” *ulama*, as well as other Islamic practitioners in Acehese society were opposed to violence, contests the notion that Acehese Islam uniformly condones and inspires violent acts. It also suggests that Acehese approaches to Islam were neither homogenous nor consistent—a fact that many accounts of this period leave unexamined.

Finally, the idea that Acehese women were treated as equals during the religious reforms deserves greater pause. For example, James Siegel’s detailed examination of the new religious messages that *ulama* dispersed at this time suggests that Acehese women were not necessarily seen as equals. According to Siegel, the reformist *ulama* preached that control over *hawa-nafsu* or, “passion, desire, nature itself,” was the only way to receive God’s commands and

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<sup>98</sup> Drexler, *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State*, 52.

<sup>99</sup> Sulaiman, “From Autonomy to Periphery,” 130.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-31, 136.



enter into heaven.<sup>101</sup> Siegel writes, “when man responds to his *hawa nafsu*, he is led away from God, for his response to himself diverts him from obedience to God’s commands. If man had only *hawa nafsu*, he would not be able to obey God at all. But God also gave man a means to respond to Him—*akal*, or the ability to know. *Akal* is similar to our conception of rationality. Through the use of *akal*, man can know God’s commands and control his (man’s) instinctive nature, *hawa nafsu*.”<sup>102</sup> Significantly, the ability to control one’s *hawa-nafsu*, which is associated with emotions, the family, and the domestic realm, is frequently described as a capability that men alone possess.<sup>103</sup> Siegel continues, “through prayer men make themselves into rational beings in control of their own actions. They thus distinguish themselves from animals, as well as from children (*aneuk*). The latter do not yet possess a fully developed rational faculty; therefore they do not pray and have not yet become people (*ureung*).”<sup>104</sup> Moreover, the view of heaven in these new teachings clearly indicates that these messages were directed towards men: “In Paradise you do whatever you feel like. The women do not menstruate. There is nothing dirty. It is a place of happiness...Paradise is the answer for our deeds on earth. It is a garden where we live and where all our desires are fulfilled. For instance, whatever you want to eat, you get immediately. There are beautiful women...Your wife will be replaced by someone better.”<sup>105</sup>

An analysis of the messages from religious reformists at this time thus gives the impression that men alone were deemed capable of communing with God and finding their way into Paradise. In contrast, women were depicted as objects of male heterosexual desire who

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<sup>101</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 101.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

<sup>103</sup> A similar observation has been made of Javanese women. Kathryn Robinson claims, “[Javanese] women are regarded as having lower prestige because they are held to be less able to control their ‘animal’ passions and to succeed (like men) in the ascetic practices associated with the control of spiritual power.” See Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, 30.

<sup>104</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 115.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

either distract men from their religious practice or serve as a reward for men entering heaven.

This understanding of gender relations in Aceh offers a stark contrast to the idea that Acehnese women were treated as equals.

### **The Separatist Conflict, the Tsunami, and the Peace (1976-2011)**

Finally, the most recent events within Acehnese history—the GAM separatist movement, the tsunami, and the years following the peace accord—have also been interpreted in ways that support the dominant narrative of Acehnese identity. Analyses of these events have suggested that Acehnese are inclined towards self-preservation and resistance from outside influence, and that the exceptional Islamic devotion of Acehnese has led to acts of extreme violence.

Depictions of Acehnese women have continued to emphasize their status as warrior-heroes who fought valiantly in the frontlines of the battle; however, Acehnese women have also been portrayed as the victims of violence, natural disaster, and conservative interpretations of *syariah* law. In this way, Acehnese women during this period are viewed as either “the woman warrior or the woman victim.”<sup>106</sup>

First, in order to explain the emergence of the separatist conflict in Aceh, writers have pointed to a pre-existing political identity, suggesting that Acehnese have always resisted foreign influence (whether Portuguese, Dutch, or Indonesian), as well as an unchanging Islamic identity, which characterizes Acehnese as having always desired *syariah* law and as willing to resort to violence to achieve it. According to William Nessen, “Aceh Merdeka needs to be understood as a product of longer-standing historical sentiments that stretch back to the fight against the Dutch and of even deeper, centuries-old feelings that the Acehnese have about their unique place in the

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<sup>106</sup> Giles and Hyndman, “Introduction: Gender and Conflict,” 16.

world.”<sup>107</sup> Viewing resistance to foreign rule as a “centuries-old” feeling, Nessen explains, “GAM leaders today imply independence sentiment was not something that had to develop even back then; they assumed it already existed.”<sup>108</sup> Hasan Di Tiro also relied on this narrative of Acehese identity in order to inspire Acehese to join the *Aceh Merdeka* movement. Viewing the Indonesian state as a “neo-colonist,” Di Tiro also claimed, “the Acehese are an entirely separate national community from that of Indonesia.”<sup>109</sup> For Reid, Hasan Di Tiro’s interpretation of Acehese history “dwells on Aceh’s historic greatness, exaggerates the Dutch failure ever to conquer it fully, and then claims that it never validly consented as a state to incorporation into Indonesia.”<sup>110</sup>

The notion that Acehese follow a particularly conservative brand of Islam also emerged during this period. As with Aceh’s early battles with neighboring powers and the Darul Islam rebellion, the GAM period also witnessed the use of Islamic verses and themes to inspire fighting. For example, some demonstrators who were advocating for Aceh’s independence recited lyrics from the *Hikayat Perang Sabil* to legitimate their cause. Alfian writes, “Despite the interaction with newer ideologies, they persisted with the tradition and rhetoric of Holy War, the belief that had been deeply rooted among the Acehese people.”<sup>111</sup> If Acehese Islam served to inspire violent acts during the GAM conflict, it has also been interpreted as a primary factor driving GAM leaders to demand independence from Indonesia. According to this narrative, Acehese were dissatisfied with their “special status” and wanted to have full control over its

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<sup>107</sup> William Nessen, “Sentiments Made Visible: The Rise and Reason of Aceh’s National Liberation Movement,” in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 185.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>109</sup> Aspinnall, *Islam and Nation*, 168.

<sup>110</sup> Anthony Reid, “Aceh and Indonesia: A Stormy Marriage” (Program for Southeast Asian Area Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, CA: 2001), 5.

<sup>111</sup> Alfian, “Aceh and the Holy War,” 118.

interpretation of Islamic law. As a result of this interpretation of the GAM fighters' motivations, Indonesian government officials granted Aceh the right to implement *syariah* law in an effort "to win over the 'rebellious Acehnese.'"<sup>112</sup>

Depictions of Acehnese women during the conflict have tended to focus on women's roles as either heroes and leaders or voiceless victims. As an example of the former, the wife of a GAM resistance leader, Mariani Ali, has been characterized as a "modern day Cut Nyak Dien—who had led the guerillas after her husband's death."<sup>113</sup> Acehnese women also played a role in intelligence-gathering, and "since 1999 GAM boasted a battalion of female fighters known as *Inong Bale* whose main function was logistics, communications and intelligence. It also used children as spies or *cukoi* to gather information on the position and activities of the Indonesian security forces."<sup>114</sup> However, Acehnese women were also reported to have experienced brutal violence at the hands of both the Indonesian military (TNI) and Acehnese fighters (GAM). Further, women were used strategically by GAM leaders, who played upon notions of women's vulnerability to achieve their objectives. Kirsten Schulze writes, "During the *Nanggala* Operations female family members in particular were detained as hostages in order to get their male relatives to surrender. During the *Jaring Merah* Operations, family members of GAM were tortured, and many of the women suffered humiliation, sexual abuse, and rape at the hands of the security forces."<sup>115</sup> From 1989 to 1998—a period in which Aceh was labeled a Military Operations Zone (DOM)—women were also raped and abused by GAM fighters.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 229.

<sup>113</sup> Schulze, "Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency," 249.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>116</sup> Blackburn, *Women and the State*, 212.

Coverage of the tsunami also positioned women within this hero/victim dichotomy. For example, while statistics indicated that four times as many women as men perished from the disaster, NGO reports suggested that women were also vulnerable *after* the disaster. The authors of “Tsunami Response and Women” found that women living in relief camps were subjected to harassment and abuse, and “stories about women in temporary housings being harassed and raped were not uncommon during the early weeks and months after the tsunami.”<sup>117</sup> Foreign media also found evidence that women were blamed for the tsunami, and reported that some *ulama* “began spreading the message that the tsunami was caused by women’s sins, insisting that Acehese women must now conform to strict Islamic laws to avoid another disaster.”<sup>118</sup> At the same time, journalists and political leaders often highlighted the “resilience and courage”<sup>119</sup> or the “courage and determination”<sup>120</sup> of the Acehese people. UNIFEM drew references to Aceh’s past heroines, commenting, “alongside these challenges however there has been a demonstration of great strength of spirit, exemplifying generations of resilient women.”<sup>121</sup> Reporter Tess Bacalla also suggests that Acehese women were particularly resilient: “Despite their added burdens and increased vulnerability, women appear more aggressive than men in ensuring their families’ survival. Right after the disaster and even beyond the rehabilitation phase, women willingly take on even the most challenging of tasks just so their families would be able to eat for

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<sup>117</sup> Mazalan Kamis and Saiful Mahdi, “Tsunami Response and Women” (paper presented at the International Conference of Women and Infectious Diseases, Atlanta, March 16-18, 2006), 2006.

<sup>118</sup> Global Exchange, “Aceh: Peace After the Waters? Aceh: Challenges of Reconstruction and Peace One Year Later” (March 2006), <http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/asia/indonesia/AcehReport.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2012), 2006.

<sup>119</sup> Susilo Bambang Yodhoyono, “President of the Republic of Indonesia on the Report of the Aceh-Nias Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency,” in *Aceh and Nias One Year After the Tsunami: The Recovery Effort and Way Forward*, United Nations (New York, NY: United Nations, 2005), 3.

<sup>120</sup> William J. Clinton, “From the United Nations Special Envoy,” in *Aceh and Nias One Year After the Tsunami: The Recovery Effort and Way Forward*, United Nations (New York, NY: United Nations, 2005), 4.

<sup>121</sup> Leonie-Ruth Acland, “UNIFEM Global Coalition Field Trip,” *UNIFEM Report* (September 2009), [www.workingwithwomen.com.au/Aceh%20report%20final%20Sat%2019%20September.pdf](http://www.workingwithwomen.com.au/Aceh%20report%20final%20Sat%2019%20September.pdf) (accessed April 25, 2012).

the day.”<sup>122</sup> In this view, Acehese women are able to act as leaders and heroines even during the most extreme suffering and devastation. Importantly, for Bacalla, their status as courageous leaders does not conflict with their social responsibilities as mothers and caregivers.

Finally, in the years following the tsunami, the narrative of Acehese women as either voiceless victims or passionate leaders has emerged within media coverage of *syariah* law in Aceh. On the one hand, local and foreign newspapers as well as NGOs have frequently reported incidents of harassment and abuse towards Acehese women who had violated *syariah* law by not wearing a headscarf, or *jilbab*, or for wearing pants considered to be too tight by the *syariah* police. Kamaruzzaman observed, “In the absence of a formal legal body during this period, many people took the enforcement of Islamic law into their own hands. Sweepings and inspections to find women not wearing *jilbab* were carried out by talibaný (Islamic student) groups, university students, female police officers and unknown armed groups. Every male or person of ‘power’ felt that they had the right to judge women. During these inspections, women were subjected to various forms of violence.”<sup>123</sup> In reports such as this one, Acehese women are depicted as passive, voiceless victims forced to endure the harsh regulations of Islamic law.

On the other hand, Acehese politicians, religious leaders, and others have argued that women in post-conflict, post-tsunami Aceh have not been disadvantaged by *syariah* law and would continue to enjoy the freedoms they have “always” enjoyed. Abdullah Puteh, who served as Aceh’s governor in 2003, announced, “in Aceh Islamic law will be implemented in a moderate way and gradually. We want to project a calm image of Islam here,” and added that

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<sup>122</sup> Tess Bacalla, “Women Tough It Out in Post-Disaster Situations,” *Southeast Asian Press Alliance* (May 12, 2010), <http://www.seapabkk.org/announcements/fellowship-2005-program/63-women-tough-it-out-in-post-disaster-situations.html> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>123</sup> Suraiya Kamaruzzaman, “Women and Syariah in Indonesia,” *Inside Indonesia* 79 (July-September 2004), <http://www.insideindonesia.org/edition-79/women-and-syariah-in-aceh> (accessed April 25, 2012).

“no crippling limitations would be imposed on the role of women.”<sup>124</sup> The BBC also reported positive attitudes towards the new *syariah* courts. One *syariah* supporter claimed, “I will be very happy if they apply Sharia law, because it will be safer for women if we go out.”<sup>125</sup> Far from restricting Acehese women’s freedoms, then, the implementation of *syariah* law in Aceh, according to this view, will improve women’s lives. In this way, women are depicted either as being at the mercy of *syariah* law and its enforcers or as individuals who will benefit directly from the implementation of *syariah* law in Aceh.

### ***Revisiting: The Separatist Conflict, the Tsunami, and the Peace***

In order to arrive at a more complex understanding of Acehese identity, other factors that precipitated the GAM conflict as well as other ways of characterizing Acehese Islamic practice and gender dynamics must be explored. First, the GAM conflict cannot be viewed solely or primarily as the result of a presumably long-standing desire of Acehese to be independent or to implement *syariah* law; instead, the conflict emerged for a variety of reasons. For example, as part of his “New Order” government (1967-1998), Indonesia’s second president, President Suharto, pursued greater centralization and permitted additional exploitation of Indonesia’s resources as he courted foreign investors. Not only did Acehese see little profit from their rubber, palm oil, timber, and coffee resources,<sup>126</sup> but employment positions were also being filled primarily by non-Acehese,<sup>127</sup> and, particularly in Lhokseumawe, Acehese suffered

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<sup>124</sup> Melhem Karan, “Indonesia: A ‘Moderate’ Sharia Court Inaugurated in Aceh,” *Monday Morning* (March 2006), <http://www.mmorning.com/Article.asp?Article=5093&CategoryID=7> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>125</sup> “Aceh’s Sharia Court Opens,” *BBC News* (April 3, 2003), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2816785.stm> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>126</sup> Sulaiman explains, “The main natural resources in Aceh, oil and natural gas, did not contribute much to the local economy, since these industries were directly controlled by the central government.” See Sulaiman, “From Autonomy to Periphery,” 134.

<sup>127</sup> Aspinall also notes that many non-Acehese migrants brought a different lifestyle into Aceh that was offensive to Acehese. See Aspinall, *Islam and Nation*, 55.

from unemployment and poverty.<sup>128</sup> Geoffrey Robinson argues that economic development in Aceh resulted in “the expropriation of land from small farmers without adequate compensation, the failure to provide adequate social amenities and infrastructure for displaced communities and migrant workers, and serious environmental degradation in the vicinity of the plants.”<sup>129</sup>

The exploitation of natural resources, the disregard for traditional cultivation practices, and the economic discrimination against Acehnese contributed to a growing frustration, particularly among the educated middle-class.<sup>130</sup> As the Jakarta government became increasingly centralized, Indonesia continued development in Aceh and stripped Aceh’s regional leaders of their power, causing many Acehnese to feel that their “special” status was an empty promise.<sup>131</sup> Further, many Acehnese were offended by the presence of Indonesian troops, which, in the 1980s and 1990s were guilty of very serious human rights abuses. The exploitation of Aceh’s resources and the human rights abuses committed by GAM and the TNI suggest that the GAM conflict was a result of specific historical circumstances, rather than a continuation of an innate Acehnese characteristic or identity. As Geoffrey Robinson explains, “The recent Aceh Merdeka uprisings, and the extreme violence that followed from them, cannot properly be understood solely as the continuation of a tradition. Indeed, the differences between the aims and the leadership of Aceh Merdeka and the earlier rebellions, and the on-again off-again pattern of political trouble in Aceh, both suggest that the rise of Aceh Merdeka and the extreme violence after 1989 were related to changes in the broader economic and political environment.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Robinson, “Rawan is as Rawan Does,” 135.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>130</sup> Sulaiman, “From Autonomy to Periphery,” 125-26, 134.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 133.



It is also important to note that the GAM fighting was not a continuous pattern of violence; in fact, the fighting largely subsided during the early 1980s, but returned with renewed vigor in 1989. In retaliation, President Suharto declared Aceh a *Daerah Operasi Militer* (Military Operation Zone) from 1989-1998, which saw an increase in violence from both GAM and TNI members. In her analysis of insurgency and counter-insurgency strategies, Kirsten Schulze maintains that GAM members were guilty of extortion, manipulation, and human rights abuses; however, this cannot be considered a uniquely Acehnese trait since the TNI committed similar crimes.<sup>133</sup> One strategy that was employed by both GAM and TNI was “civil-military cooperation,” or “the policy of compelling civilians to participate in intelligence and security operations against real or alleged government opponents.”<sup>134</sup> This practice, while not unique to Aceh, had the effect of producing “an atmosphere of pervasive fear and silence.”<sup>135</sup>

The view that Acehnese Islam encouraged violence during the GAM conflict, or that GAM rebels fought in order to achieve *syariah* law, also demands reconsideration. First, as in the Darul Islam rebellion, not all of Aceh’s religious leaders supported violence. Sulaiman observes, “the traditional *ulamas* and the *tarekat* leaders had a moderate interpretation of religion in its relation with the state. When GAM committed violent acts, *ulamas* such as Tgk. Usman Ali Kutakrueng, Tgk. Ali Irsyad and Tgk. Amin Blang Bladeh in 1990-91 repeatedly reminded the people that violent actions that destroy the unity of the people are forbidden by the religion.”<sup>136</sup> Second, the implementation of *syariah* law in Acehnese society was hardly a priority for GAM fighters, let alone the majority of Acehnese. As a result, the implementation of

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<sup>133</sup> Schulze “Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency,” 225-271.

<sup>134</sup> Robinson, “Rawan is as Rawan Does,” 143.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 136.

*syariah* in 2003 did not resolve the conflict.<sup>137</sup> Even *ulama*, who believed that Islamic law was sufficiently implemented in Acehnese everyday practice, were not in full support of *syariah*, and an interest in issues such as human rights and greater revenue-sharing dominated their concerns. Moreover, Aceh has not been the only region in Indonesia to express an interest in passing regulations related to *syariah* law; districts in West Java, West Sumatra, and South Sulawesi have also passed local regulations (*peraturan daerah*) concerning “public order and social problems,” such as gambling and prostitution, and religious obligations, such as wearing appropriate Muslim attire.<sup>138</sup> The current implementation of *syariah* law in Aceh is thus neither a testament to a uniquely Acehnese characteristic of unwavering or strict Islamic practice, nor a panacea for the grievances that emerged out of GAM. Instead, it indicates the degree to which assumptions about Acehnese identity have shaped political decisions.

Finally, portraying Acehnese women as either “warrior queens” or victims presents an incomplete picture of Acehnese women’s roles during this time. For example, although Acehnese women who participated in the GAM conflict are usually depicted as *Inong Balee* combatants, Acehnese women were also “individual women fighters, cooks, logisticians, fundraisers, nurses, propagandists, and part of the intelligence service.”<sup>139</sup> Moreover, Acehnese women who fought directly in the separatist conflict should not be the only women counted among Aceh’s “heroes.” For Jacqueline Siapno, Acehnese women employed numerous non-violent strategies in order to resist the oppressive environment engendered by the conflict. For example, in using their “feminine wiles,” or learning how to “*merayu*...to put on a lot of make-

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<sup>137</sup> Rodd McGibbon, “Local Leadership and the Aceh Conflict,” in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 333.

<sup>138</sup> Robin Bush, “Regional ‘Sharia’ Regulations in Indonesia: Anomaly or Symptom?” in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, eds. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

<sup>139</sup> Clavé-Çelik, “Images of the Past,” 11.

up and look very attractive” so that military guards “forget their duties and loosen-up,” Acehnese women were able to negotiate with military leaders at check-points or free their relatives from prison.<sup>140</sup> Their ambiguous attitudes towards their husbands’ imprisonment—ranging from frustration and sorrow to relief and feelings of freedom—also challenge the image of the “suffering stoic woman” or the “suffering wife.”<sup>141</sup> In this way, Acehnese women occupied multiple subject positions during the conflict and experienced varying degrees of agency.

A more careful analysis of how *syariah* law has influenced Acehnese women in the past decade also unsettles this hero/victim dichotomy. First, the degree to which *syariah* law impedes women’s rights depends upon the social climate and the manner in which it is enforced. In Aceh, *syariah* law was enforced more stringently during the last four years of the GAM conflict due to the large presence of military troops and existing tensions between GAM rebels and TNI members. Kamaruzzaman notes, “It has not only been ulama and the regional government who have been involved in the administration of *syariah* in Aceh. The police and the military have also participated.”<sup>142</sup> Although women continue to be disproportionately targeted and harassed as a result of *syariah* law, incidents of violence and abuse today are far fewer than during the conflict. The enforcement of *syariah* law also varies by region. In October 2010, the district council chairman of Bireuen claimed that women were unfit to lead under *syariah* law and called for the replacement of a female subdistrict head.<sup>143</sup> The following month, officials in West Aceh forbade Acehnese women from wearing jeans and tight pants. But these policies have not been

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<sup>140</sup> Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State*, 18.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>142</sup> Kamaruzzaman, “Women and Syariah in Indonesia.”

<sup>143</sup> Nurdin Hasan, “Women Unfit to Lead Says Acehnese District Council Chairman,” *The Jakarta Globe*, (October 8, 2010), <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/women-unfit-to-lead-says-acehnese-district-council-chairman/400219> (accessed April 25, 2012).

pursued in other parts of Aceh. On the contrary, they have been met with harsh criticism from local organizations and media.

Second, the fact that several women's conferences were held during and after the conflict suggests that *syariah* law has not completely prevented Acehnese women from gathering publicly to voice their opinions. For example, the All Acehnese Women's Congress (*Duek Paket Inong*), which drew over four hundred women from all over Aceh, met in 2000 and 2005 to discuss women's roles in the peace process, women's roles in the reconstruction process, and how *syariah* law would affect Acehnese women. For Susan Blackburn, the conference resulted in "an institution of Acehnese women to continue working for peace, for economic progress, and to distinguish 'customs that damage women.'"<sup>144</sup> Among the recommendations that Acehnese women made during this conference was the establishment of a 30% quota for female candidates in Aceh's elections. According to UNIFEM, these recommendations "were subsequently taken to and adopted by the government."<sup>145</sup> The *Duek Paket Inong* conferences and the presence of numerous women's NGOs in Aceh at this time thus present a challenge to the notion of Acehnese women as voiceless victims, and instead attest to the determination of Acehnese women to resist male-centric policies.

Unfortunately, the fact that women were able to successfully organize and voice their opinions does not mean that these opinions were *heard*. For example, despite their attempts to be included in the peace process, UNIFEM found, "women had very little input in the lead up to the MOU [Memorandum of Understanding] despite the UNIFEM-funded Second All Acehnese Women's Congress held in June 2005... The Women's Policy Network (JPuK) subsequently offered 25 recommendations to the Law on Governing Aceh (LoGA) in 2006 but only six were

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<sup>144</sup> Blackburn, *Women and the State*, 215.

<sup>145</sup> "Aceh Tsunami Response," *UNIFEM Newsletter* 1 (July 2005), 3.

integrated.”<sup>146</sup> Further, although the 30% quota regarding Acehese women’s political representation was established, this goal has not yet been achieved. Reporting on the 2009 election, Blair Palmer explains, “while many women were recruited in order to meet the stipulated 30 per cent quota for each party, the majority of these candidates did not earn enough individual votes to be elected. This was related to several factors. Some of these female candidates were inexperienced politicians recruited merely to achieve the quota, and did not campaign actively. Additionally, many voters in Aceh still see men as more appropriate for leadership roles. As one male official from a (non-Islamic) national party told me: ‘the world was created for men, women cannot be leaders...women cannot think rationally for one week per month, so how could they make decisions?’”<sup>147</sup> These reports indicate that Acehese women are neither heroic leaders nor voiceless victims as a result of the implementation of *syariah* law in Aceh; however, they still face significant hurdles in the struggle to achieve gender equality.

### **THE LIE THAT TELLS THE TRUTH**

My re-reading of Acehese histories reveals that while certain events and periods appear to confirm the dominant narrative of Acehese identity, there are also periods in which this narrative is challenged and other ways of characterizing Acehese identity emerge. And yet, “proving” that Acehese are not always the independent and valiant warriors they claim to be, or that Aceh’s relationship with Islam is not exceptional within Indonesia, or that, in most circumstances, Acehese women are neither heroes nor victims, still does not explain *why* this characterization of Acehese identity remains so prevalent. If this formulation of Acehese identity presents only part of the truth, why does it remain so popular for Acehese and non-Acehese historians, journalists, NGO activists, and others?

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<sup>146</sup> “Increasing Women’s Political Participation in Aceh,” *UNIFEM Summary Report* (May 2009), 2.

<sup>147</sup> Blair Palmer, “The Aceh Party,” *Inside Indonesia* 97 (July-September 2009), <http://www.insideindonesia.org/edition-97/the-aceh-party> (accessed April 25, 2012).

As I will illustrate in this final section, the dominant narrative of Acehese identity has contributed to essentialist assumptions about Acehese that have informed government policies and justified acts of violence or discrimination. At the same time, essentializing Acehese identity has also served to generate cultural pride and to inspire younger generations of Acehese. The following section examines how the characterization of Acehese as heroic and independent warriors, and as devout and potentially violent Muslims, has served specific political and social purposes. I also examine why depictions of Acehese women as either heroic leaders or voiceless victims have surfaced at particular historical moments.

### **Military Heroism and Self-Reliance**

The notion that Acehese are heroic fighters who are inclined to resist foreign influence has served the Indonesian government in different ways. On the one hand, Indonesian leaders have praised Acehese for these traits, claiming that Acehese were particularly brave and persistent in resisting Dutch colonization. In this sense, the “fierce resistance” Aceh provided during the Dutch-Aceh War becomes evidence of Acehese “loyalty” towards the Republic of Indonesia and part of a larger, nationalist narrative in which *Indonesians* (not simply Acehese) defeated their colonizers. This explains why, “in the pantheon of national heroes (*pahlawan nasional*) canonized by Sukarno and continued by Suharto, Aceh is the best represented ethnic group after Javanese.”<sup>148</sup> On the other hand, the Indonesian government has identified these same traits, when directed against the Indonesian state, as signs of “rebelliousness” and has used this narrative of Acehese identity to justify the use of extreme violence against GAM rebels. Elizabeth Drexler explains, “New Order histories have transformed Acehese bravery and

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<sup>148</sup> Reid, “A Stormy Marriage,” 3.

contributions to the nation into an essentialized Acehnese character that can be invoked to justify military repression.”<sup>149</sup>

Of course, this depiction of Acehnese identity is not always used to oppress Acehnese; for Acehnese themselves, the notion that they are superior and independent fighters has been a source of immense cultural pride. For example, Acehnese often attribute the success of their empire during the Golden Age to the bravery of their warriors and the skillful leadership of their sultans, suggesting that the wealth and power of the Acehnese sultanate was achieved without the help of outside powers. For Aspinall, this narrative has been “a recurrent motif for later sultans, rebels, Islamic scholars, Indonesian nationalists, and secessionists alike.”<sup>150</sup> In other words, it is revived and reinvigorated at times when Acehnese need to believe in their superior fighting abilities. Moreover, having a narrative like this at hand is important not only for generating cultural pride; it can also help Acehnese deal with the complex emotions they experienced as a result of the recent GAM conflict. Drexler writes, “in the euphoria that followed the ending of the military operations zone...stories of Acehnese bravery circulated to remind people of a past they could be proud of. Images of the more distant past were invoked to transcend the indignities suffered at the hands of an Indonesian army undeterred by Acehnese bravery.”<sup>151</sup> As I will discuss in later chapters, invoking this notion of Acehnese identity has also been useful in addressing feelings of trauma resulting from the tsunami.

The view that heroism, superior leadership, self-reliance, independence, and courage are aspects of Acehnese identity that have their roots in the distant past has also served to mark Acehnese as “different” from other ethnic groups in Indonesia. In this sense, what is important is

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<sup>149</sup> Drexler, *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State*, 50.

<sup>150</sup> Aspinall, *Islam and Nation*, 22.

<sup>151</sup> Drexler, *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State*, 77.

not simply the idea that Acehnese are heroic and self-reliant warriors; instead, it is the notion that Acehnese *alone* possess these qualities, that Acehnese are *exceptional* in their heroism and bravery. For example, in order to distinguish themselves from other Indonesians, Acehnese continuously refer to their province as the one area the Dutch never returned to during their attempts to re-colonize Indonesia in 1945-49. As a result, countless histories identify Aceh as “the only substantial region the Dutch could not or did not enter,”<sup>152</sup> “the one region the Dutch never tried to reoccupy,”<sup>153</sup> or, the one place that the Dutch “never dared to land their forces.”<sup>154</sup> In this way, history affirms the view that Acehnese are exceptional in their military prowess and heroism, a view that will undoubtedly continue to inspire younger generations of Acehnese.

### **Islamic Devotion**

The idea that Acehnese are exceptionally devout Muslims has also served the interests of non-Acehnese governments as well as Acehnese themselves. As I mentioned in earlier sections, Aceh’s historical relationship to Islam has been interpreted as evidence that Acehnese have a long-standing desire to implement *syariah* law and that their inability to do so fueled the GAM conflict. As a result of this erroneous interpretation, both B. Jusuf Habibie and Abdurrahman Wahid, who served as Indonesia’s third and fourth presidents, respectively, attempted to grant Aceh the right to “implement Islamic law in all aspects of life.”<sup>155</sup> Wahid also visited Banda Aceh to “formally pronounce the implementation of *Syari’ah* in Aceh;” however, GAM members and many other Acehnese felt that “Jakarta’s emphasis on *Syari’ah* [was] an attempt to stereotype the Acehnese as Islamic ‘extremists.’”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Reid, *An Indonesian Frontier*, 336.

<sup>153</sup> Benedict Anderson, “Introduction,” in *Violence and the State in Suharto’s Indonesia*, ed. Benedict Anderson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2001), 13.

<sup>154</sup> Aspinall, *Islam and Nation*, 30.

<sup>155</sup> Miller, “What’s Special About Special Autonomy?” 298.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.



If the notion that Acehese are exceptionally devout or violent Muslims offered the Jakarta government a convenient explanation for separatist conflict, it may have also been used to justify the extreme violence and human rights abuses committed by the TNI. For example, the Indonesian government has responded to criticisms of Islam as a violent or “terrorist” religion (a view emanating primarily from non-Muslim, Western nations) by aligning itself with a more “moderate” or “modern” brand of Islam. Istiadah explains, “Islam in the early period of the New Order was considered the opponent of the regime...Islam was often marginalized. Islamic culture was associated with backwardness and underdevelopment.”<sup>157</sup> In labeling Acehese as “Islamic extremists,” the Indonesian government not only distances itself from Acehese Islam, it also appears justified in its efforts to suppress the GAM conflict.

Though Acehese do not consider themselves to be “Islamic extremists,” they do tend to view their faith as particularly strong and enduring. In this way, the narrative of Acehese as devout Muslims has also served to bolster cultural pride and differentiate Acehese from other Muslim Indonesians. For example, Acehese often claim that their relationship with Islam has been consistent since the religion first arrived in Aceh in the twelfth century. This belief has produced statements such as, “Islamic mores inherited from the glorious era of Acehese kingdoms have been the main influence on Acehese life and thought to the present day.”<sup>158</sup> Moreover, identifying themselves as *exceptionally* devout Muslims has enabled Acehese to distinguish themselves from other Indonesians and has thus served as a source of pride. For Jean Gelman-Taylor, this is a common practice among Indonesian Muslims, as “conversion stories from all over the archipelago are uniform in attributing to the local king the honor of becoming

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<sup>157</sup> Istiadah, “Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Investigating Paths to Resist the Patriarchal System” (Centre of Southeast Asia Studies, Monash University: Australia, 1995), 2.

<sup>158</sup> Ari Jauhari, “The Acehese Marriage” (August 27, 2008), <http://ariaceh.wordpress.com/category/ethnomusicology/> (accessed April 25, 2012).

the first Muslim. The introduction of Islam among the general population and upholding of Islamic law are also attributed to royalty, not to mosque preachers.”<sup>159</sup> In this way, claiming that Acehese leaders were the “first” or the “most devout” Muslims in the archipelago allows Acehese to stand apart from fellow Indonesians and to take pride in their Islamic identity.

### **Acehnese Women: Heroes and Victims**

Finally, the depiction of Acehese women as either “warrior queens” or voiceless victims has served a variety of aims. First, the notion that Acehese women have been courageous heroes since the Golden Age supports the argument that gender equality exists, and has always existed, in Aceh. For example, Effendi Hasan writes, “Acehnese women have served as leaders of their country as well as leaders of the opposition within Aceh’s glorious past. In Aceh, there have already been female heroes who are incredibly strong and brave, such as Laksamana Keumalahayati, Cut Nyak Dhien, Cut Meutia and others who have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with men in order to drive out the colonists... Isn’t this enough proof that gender equality between men and women has already been in place and was enjoyed by Acehese heroes, even before the arrival and development of a women’s liberation movement?”<sup>160</sup> This assumption has also led to sweeping generalizations about Islam and women’s rights in Aceh, such as, “The Islamic commitment, that all Acehese feel is part of their identity, has never reduced the economic independence of women, and in turn their relative autonomy.”<sup>161</sup> Interpreting the past military successes of some Acehese women as evidence of gender equality in present-day Aceh,

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<sup>159</sup> Gelman-Taylor, *Indonesia: Peoples and Histories*, 75.

<sup>160</sup> Effendi Hasan, “Ada Apa Dengan Gender?” in *Timang: Aceh Perempuan Kesetaraan*, eds. Fajran Zain and Saiful Mahdi (Banda Aceh: The Aceh Institute, 2005), 4-5. Indonesian: “Perempuan-perempuan Aceh telah pernah menjadi pemimpin negara maupun pemimpin perlawanan dalam sejarah Aceh yang gemilang. Di Aceh telah pernah lahir pahlawan-pahlawan dari kaum perempuan yang sangat gagah perkasa seperti Laksamana Keumalahayati, Cut Nyak Dhien, Cut Meutia dan lain-lain yang bahu-membahu dengan kaum laki-laki dalam mengusir para penjajah...Apakah hal ini tidak cukup menjadi satu bukti bahwa kesetaraan gender antara laki-laki dan perempuan telah pernah dilakukan oleh pahlawan-pahlawan Aceh sebelum datang dan berkembangnya gerakan pembebasan wanita?”

<sup>161</sup> Reid, “Introduction,” 9.

these writers romanticize and over-simplify Acehese women's contributions within Acehese history while overlooking the multiple and complex challenges that Acehese women face today.

It is also important to note that the narrative of the Acehese "woman-warrior" has not always been emphasized in the same way and, during certain historical moments, has even been silenced. For example, while Aceh's early female fighters have been named national heroes for their contributions to the *Indonesian* Republic, Acehese women who served in the *Inong Balee* have not been recognized for their bravery or courage. According to Clavé-Çelik, "after the signing of the Helsinki peace agreement, few *Inong Balee* were automatically recognised by GAM leaders as having taken part in the struggle. This is even more surprising given the organisation's open propaganda regarding their women fighters and reference to the ubiquitous Malahayati, Cut Nyak Dhien, and Cut Meutia."<sup>162</sup> This analysis suggests that the trope of the Acehese woman-warrior was considered inappropriate and unnecessary at a time when Acehese were negotiating for peace. Further, by applauding the efforts of Acehese female fighters during colonial battles but rejecting similar signs of "rebelliousness" during the GAM conflict, the Indonesian nation-state clearly designates "acceptable" female aggression as those acts that further nationalist goals.

At the same time, the notion that Acehese women are particularly courageous and have occupied positions of power undoubtedly offers a positive symbol and source of pride for Acehese men and women alike. In pointing to the four sultanas who held the throne from 1641 to 1699, the resistance leaders who fought against Dutch colonization, the women who participated in the GAM struggle, and the women who have continued to fight for gender equality within Aceh's post-conflict, post-tsunami climate, Acehese are able to construct a

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<sup>162</sup> Clavé-Çelik, "Images of the Past," 11.

vision of Acehnese femininity that might inspire Acehnese during times of vulnerability and powerlessness. The image of the heroic and resilient warrior-queen has certainly proved powerful for Aceh's conflict and tsunami survivors and has enabled Acehnese women to distinguish themselves from other women in Indonesia.

In direct contrast to the view of Acehnese women as courageous warriors and leaders, the depiction of Acehnese women as voiceless victims has also served several different aims. The idea that Acehnese are victimized as a result of *syariah* law, for example, has confirmed the suspicions of foreign observers that Islam is a violent and misogynist religion. Within *The Los Angeles Times*, the BBC, and *The Australian*, articles about *syariah* law in Aceh have focused primarily upon its harsh enforcement and violence committed by *syariah* police officers, and are usually accompanied by photos of violence against women.<sup>163</sup> Acehnese newspapers, however, have discussed the broader significance of *syariah* regulations, viewing *syariah* law as both a peace-keeping mechanism and a reflection of Acehnese cultural values. In this way, local media has painted a much more neutral image of the influence of Islamic law on Acehnese communities.

On the other hand, Acehnese women have not been treated equally under *syariah* law and continue to struggle for gender equality. Drawing attention to the ways in which Acehnese women have been victimized—whether as a result of the conflict, the tsunami, or male-dominated post-conflict, post-tsunami policies—has allowed NGO staff and other women's activists to raise awareness and, in some cases, funding for gender issues in Aceh. Exposing, but not exaggerating, statistics about women's oppression in Aceh, is also important for replacing

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<sup>163</sup> For example, a survey of recent headlines in *The LA Times* reveals that articles about Aceh's *syariah* law focus on violence and abuse of women: "Indonesia's Aceh Province OKs Stoning for Adulterers" (September 15, 2009), "Aceh's Morality Police on the Prowl for Violators" (November 8, 2009), and "Indonesia Sharia Police Accused of Gang Rape" (January 15, 2010). In contrast, *Serambi*, of Aceh, and *Waspada* from Medan have reported on the effects of specific *qanun* (regulations), discussing their advantages and limitations for Acehnese society.

the warrior-queen “archetype” with information about Acehese women’s political and social realities.

## **CONCLUSION**

In exploring the many histories of Acehese identity, this chapter has shown that while Acehese continue to be defined by their “heroic struggle for self-preservation” and their exceptional devotion to Islam, these labels have not always been accurate, nor are they the only qualities that constitute Acehese identity. Nevertheless, the flexibility of this narrative—its ability to be reconstructed, misinterpreted, emphasized, or silenced at different historical moments—has enabled it to serve the aims of Acehese and non-Acehese alike and, as a result, this narrative has endured.

My exploration of Acehese performance traditions and their significance for Acehese communities builds upon this understanding of Acehese identity as a malleable construct that nevertheless holds substance and meaning for Acehese. In the next chapter, I critically examine constructions of Acehese identity within Acehese cultural traditions, giving particular focus to gender and the performing arts.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Adat, Gender, and Aceh's Performing Arts*

Much like Acehnese histories, Aceh's cultural traditions have been viewed as reflections of an unchanging, "inherent" Acehnese identity. Within Acehnese architecture, marriage ceremonies, conflict resolution practices, and the arts, for example, scholars of Aceh and Acehnese themselves identify aspects of these traditions that reinforce dominant assumptions about Aceh's political and religious identity.<sup>164</sup> These traditions have also been invoked to support a particular narrative about Acehnese women's roles and gender relations.

This chapter will examine popular and scholarly interpretations of Acehnese traditions, including dance, music, and theater practices. In the opening section I offer an overview of how *adat* has been conceptualized within theoretical conversations and articulate my own understanding of tradition. The second section explores two Acehnese traditions—the practice of *merantau* and Aceh's matrifocal kinship system—and questions the significance of these traditions for communicating particular ideas about gender relations in Aceh. Next, I turn to Acehnese performance traditions. This second half of the chapter focuses on three primary questions: How have Acehnese performance practices supported dominant narratives about Acehnese identity? What alternative constructions of Acehnese identity can be found within Aceh's performing arts? Finally, in addition to serving as a *reflection* of Acehnese identity, in what other ways does Acehnese traditional performance continue to hold significance for Acehnese communities today? In offering a comprehensive introduction to, and gendered

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<sup>164</sup> For example, see Margaret Kartomi, "Some Implications of Local Concepts of Space in the Dance, Music and Visual Arts of Aceh," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 36 (2004); Ari Jauhari, "The Acehnese Marriage" (August 28, 2008), <http://ariaceh.wordpress.com/category/ethnomusicology/> (accessed April 25, 2012); Leena Avonius, "Reconciliation and Human Rights in Post-Conflict Aceh," in *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*, ed. Birgit Bräuchler (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); and Iwan Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere: Dynamics of the Traditional Vocal Performers in the Islamic Region of Aceh from the Late 19<sup>th</sup> to the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century" (PhD diss., Monash University School of Music, Melbourne, 2006).

analysis of, Acehnese traditions and performance, I lay the groundwork for an investigation of the role of Acehnese performance within trauma recovery, which is the focus of Chapter 3.

### **UNDERSTANDING *ADAT***

In Indonesian, *adat* translates as “tradition,” “custom,” or “customary law,” and has been used to indicate a set of social, cultural, economic, political, religious, or legal practices to which a particular group subscribes. Margaret Kartomi describes *adat* as, “traditional customs...derived from the ancestors” that ““provided the cosmological order, the primary...explanation that rendered the world intelligible and informed one how to act in it.””<sup>165</sup> This view suggests that *adat* practices, which are significant for providing structure or order to social life, are considered to have roots in the ancient past and to have remained unchanged over time. In part, the belief that traditions have been continuously transmitted from past to present grants them their authority and legitimacy. Stephanie Lawson explains, “Tradition also implies a strong sense of duty and respect based on reverence for the *age-old* nature of the phenomenon...Thus the very fact that something has been transmitted from generation to generation, or is believed to have been so transmitted, enjoins acceptance of its automatic legitimacy, and is therefore deferred to without argument.”<sup>166</sup> While many Indonesians believe that *adat* practices have remained unchanged throughout history, they also consider *adat* to be unchangeable; that is, *adat* cannot be altered in the present or the future. C. Snouke Hurgronje, a Dutch Native Affairs officer and scholar who published two volumes about Acehnese culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, observed, “In contrast to the changeableness of the individual, the *adat*

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<sup>165</sup> Kartomi, “Concepts of Space,” 4.

<sup>166</sup> Stephanie Lawson, “The Tyranny of Tradition: Critical Reflections on Nationalist Narratives in the South Pacific,” in *Narratives of Nation*, eds. Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 23-4.

presents itself as something abiding and incontrovertible, with which that individual may not meddle.”<sup>167</sup>

Despite the belief that traditions are immune to outside influence, however, scholars have shown that traditions are often shaped by numerous forces, such as religion, colonialism, and political ideologies. Kathryn Robinson explains, “Social practices... cannot be regarded as pure manifestations of *adat* and are imbricated with—indeed often inseparable from—other ideological systems which also have regulations in regard to personal and social life.”<sup>168</sup> The view that traditions are not “pure,” immutable practices but can instead be reconstructed to serve particular political aims has inspired the notion of “invented” traditions. According to Hobsbawm and Ranger, “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past... They are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.”<sup>169</sup> Viewing tradition as a set of practices that is always informed by the present and exists in a constant state of “invention” and reconstruction, Felicia Hughes-Freeland claims, “tradition is a process, not a thing.”<sup>170</sup>

This understanding of tradition mirrors my discussion of Acehnese history, which, as I suggested in Chapter 1, can be reinterpreted and even “invented” in ways that advance the aims of particular historical actors during particular historical moments. In *Shadows of Empire*, for

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<sup>167</sup> C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Achehnese*, vol. 1, trans. A.W.S. O’Sullivan (Leyden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill Publishers, 1906), 10.

<sup>168</sup> Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 20.

<sup>169</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

<sup>170</sup> Felicia Hughes-Freeland, “Constructing a Classical Tradition: Javanese Court Dance in Indonesia,” in *Dancing from Past to Present*, ed. Theresa Buckland (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 55.



example, Laurie Sears argues that Dutch colonizers rewrote Javanese shadow puppet plays (*wayang kulit*) in order to prevent rebellion. Fearing that Islam could unite Indonesians in opposition to Dutch rule (the Dutch-Aceh War being a prime example), Dutch officials revised *wayang kulit* scripts to emphasize “ancient ‘Hindu-Javanese’ literary traditions” and minimize Islamic themes.<sup>171</sup> In this way, traditions offer a site for political manipulation and control. For Keith Foulcher, Indonesia’s local traditions have been manipulated not only by foreign colonizers, but also by the Indonesian nation-state. Foulcher explains, “the relationship between the promotion of a national culture and the preservation and cultivation of local, or regional cultures has been one of tension, as the state attempts to promote those cultural values and forms which serve its own economic and political interests and to prevent local cultures and languages from becoming an alternative focus of allegiance and identity... Tradition and the region are incorporated and disempowered, rather than denied, because they function to contain the foreseen excesses of ‘modern’ cultural values and practices.”<sup>172</sup> In this view, Indonesian traditions survive only when they can be reconstructed to reflect the aims of the modern nation-state.

At the same time that traditions have been “invented,” reconstructed, and repackaged to facilitate political manipulation or domination, traditions continue to hold significance for the individuals and communities that lay claim to them. For example, cultural traditions can offer a means for cultural groups to distinguish themselves from others and to legitimate their identity. Stephanie Lawson explains, “the reassertion of ‘traditional’ ways represents a break away from the negative, usually racist, legacies of colonial rule towards the construction or reconstruction of

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<sup>171</sup> Laurie Sears, ed., *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 76.

<sup>172</sup> Keith Foulcher, “The Construction of an Indonesian National Culture: Patterns of Hegemony and Resistance,” in *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*, ed. Arief Budiman (Monash University: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 301-2.

a confident, positive, and in some senses authentic' national identity for former colonial peoples... The primary factor in maintaining a distinctive sense of group identity is the idea of a unique national history which is expressed and narrated through the concept of tradition."<sup>173</sup> This understanding of tradition emerges within Ari Jauhari's analysis of Acehese marriage customs. Though Jauhari acknowledges the extent to which outside forces have shaped Acehese *adat*, he also claims that Acehese marriage practices remain unique to Aceh. Jauhari writes, "Acehese rituals display a mixture of cultural traits and influences from centuries of interaction with the outside world, particularly cultures from throughout the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian regions. At the same time, the Acehese have created distinctive norms and traditions that reflect a unique cultural identity compared to other societies in Indonesia."<sup>174</sup> In this way, though it is important to understand the political uses and abuses of traditions, it is also important to recognize that "In social life what people accept as real is real in its consequences."<sup>175</sup>

I understand traditions as both authentic representations of particular communities that appear unchanging over time, as well as fabrications, partial truths, and rewritten histories that can advance political and social agendas. Serving as a *reflection* of cultural identity, or what Thomas Turino and James Lea term an "identity emblem,"<sup>176</sup> Acehese traditions can signify solidarity and bring legitimacy to Acehese culture. They can also offer Acehese communities a tool for self-representation. However, as fluctuating practices and "inventions," traditions can also offer a site in which to *construct* identity. Traditions can thus be used to facilitate

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<sup>173</sup> Lawson, "The Tyranny of Tradition," 15-16.

<sup>174</sup> Jauhari, "The Acehese Marriage," 2.

<sup>175</sup> C. K. Mahmood and S. L. Armstrong, "Do Ethnic Groups Exist? A Cognitive Perspective on the Concept of Cultures," *Ethnology* 31 (1992): 8, quoted in *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*, ed. Birgit Bräuchler (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 100.

<sup>176</sup> Thomas Turino and James Lea, eds., *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities* (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2004), 9.

manipulation and legitimate erroneous narratives about Acehese identity. On the other hand, traditions can also offer a space to re-imagine, critique, and reconstruct Acehese identity in ways that serve the needs of Acehese individuals and communities.

### **ACEHNESE ADAT**

Like many other ethnic groups in Indonesia, Acehese lay claim to a number of cultural practices that they believe are *khas Aceh* (specific to Aceh) and are considered to have existed in Aceh for centuries. In this section I will focus on two Acehese *adat* practices: *merantau* and matrifocality. These traditions have been interpreted in ways that support dominant views of Acehese identity, particularly in regards to men and women's social roles. My reading of these traditions, however, paints a more nuanced picture of gender relations in Aceh.

#### **Merantau**

Translated as “to leave one's home areas to make one's way in life,” “to wander about,” or “to sail along the reaches of a river,”<sup>177</sup> *merantau* (*meurantoe* in Acehese) refers to the practice of leaving home for a significant part of the year in order to earn a living. Antje Missbach also describes *merantau* as the act of “leaving home for a certain amount of time to gather experience, learn new skills and make one's fortune.”<sup>178</sup> Significantly, *merantau* is associated with the male gender; not only is it considered part of man's husbandly “duties,”<sup>179</sup> but it is also seen as a natural or ordinary experience for Acehese men.

Although women do not *merantau* themselves, this tradition has significant implications for Acehese women's social roles. John Bowen writes, “most Acehese men spent years away from their village at study or work, in all-male settings. Women, by contrast, were at the center

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<sup>177</sup> John M. Echols and Hassan Shadily, *Kamus Indonesia-Inggris: An Indonesian-English Dictionary* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1989), 449-50.

<sup>178</sup> Antje Missbach, “Long-distance Politics in Transition: Aceh's Diaspora During and After the Homeland Conflict (1976-2009)” (PhD diss., The Australian National University, Canberra, 2009), 36.

<sup>179</sup> James Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 54.

of village life, remaining in their natal villages after marriage, receiving houses from their fathers, and managing ricefields.”<sup>180</sup> John Siegel’s research has suggested that during the extended periods of time when women are left in their local communities, they become managers of all household affairs. According to Siegel, “in the absence of their husbands, the management of nearly all land is in the hands of women... The income from this land is controlled by women. In addition to the return women get from their own and their husbands’ land, they also receive about half the return to labor: they do the weeding and planting for which they are paid.”<sup>181</sup>

There are several different ways to conceive of *merantau* in the context of Acehnese identity and gender relations. First, a romanticized account of this practice depicts Acehnese men as brave and independent adventurers who readily embark on an unpredictable journey to foreign lands in order to “make their fortune.” This version of *merantau* thus supports the view that Acehnese men are heroic and self-reliant. However, Acehnese women have also been viewed as self-reliant and agentive as a result of the *merantau* tradition. The fact that women are left in charge of managing their land and controlling their income during their husbands’ absence has led some scholars to believe that the domestic realm is a place of female agency and power and, in contrast, men are “powerless” within this sphere. For example, Seigel writes, “One reason for the powerlessness of men could be their prolonged absence. It is true that women must make many decisions when men are gone, but even when men are home, they have no power.”<sup>182</sup> Kathryn Robinson has also observed that traveling on the *rantau* leaves Acehnese men dependent on their wives for respect and approval. Upon returning from the *rantau*, Acehnese men “can satisfy their desires and are indulged again like children,” but, for Robinson,

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<sup>180</sup> John Bowen, “Modern Intentions: Reshaping Subjectivities in an Indonesian Muslim Society,” in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatich (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 175.

<sup>181</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 143-44.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

“this leaves them without authority in regard to their wives.”<sup>183</sup> As a result, scholars have claimed that “Atjehnese women...reproach their husbands for their weak nature”<sup>184</sup> and that Acehese husbands “are easy prey for their wives.”<sup>185</sup>

This reading of *merantau* views Acehese men as fearless adventurers abroad, but dependent and powerless husbands at home. It also suggests that Acehese women have agency within the domestic sphere. Of course, there are several other ways of understanding this tradition. For example, Siegel argues that traveling on the *rantau* was a practical journey that men made for financial reason, not a formative journey that molded Acehese men into courageous adventurers. Siegel notes, “The Atjehnese *rantau* pattern...should not be overly romanticized. It was not expected that a man go on the *rantau* in order to become a man. He ‘went to the East’...or on the *rantau*, because he had no other means of earning a livelihood. If a man could make a satisfactory income in Pidie, he stayed at home.”<sup>186</sup> Moreover, *merantau* has also been identified as a tradition that the Minang and Batak people of Sumatra follow and, in this way, is not a unique Acehese practice. Nonetheless, dominant interpretations of *merantau* suggest that this tradition is a reflection of Acehese identity, exemplifying the bravery and independence of Acehese men and the self-reliance and power of Acehese women.

In my own analysis, this popular understanding of *merantau* serves several functions. First, claiming *merantau* as an Acehese practice allows Acehese to distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups in Indonesia and can be a source of cultural pride or even a source of comfort. For example, the notion that Acehese have been bravely traveling to new lands for centuries and that this practice is embedded within Acehese cultural identity can alleviate the

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<sup>183</sup> Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, 26.

<sup>184</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 96.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

anxieties of Acehnese living in the diaspora, a point I will return to in Chapter 4. This narrative of *merantau* may also offer reassurance to Acehnese who were forced to relocate as a result of the conflict or the tsunami.

Second, the idea that the *merantau* tradition affords Acehnese women power and agency within the domestic sphere lies in stark contrast to common readings of women's connection to the home, particularly within Muslim communities. For example, Istiadah argues that Islamic discourses in Indonesia "have been in favour of men. Women are considered inferior to men and therefore must be protected by either father, husband or brother... Women's proper place is in the house and therefore, they cannot participate outside the house without the husband's permission."<sup>187</sup> Julia Suryakusuma has also observed that the role of "housewife" in Indonesia is one of dependency and powerlessness and has been depicted as women's ideal occupation within Indonesian state ideology. Suryakusuma explains, "Women are relegated to becoming dependent, 'non-productive' housewives who provide 'free' domestic labour and who, as a result, have become isolated, atomized, disorganized and deprived of political and economic power, placing them in a subordinate position to men."<sup>188</sup> In this view, women's connection to the domestic sphere is seen as a form of imprisonment, and the "private" space of the home, the sphere of reproductive labor and the family, is considered inferior to the "public" realm of productive labor.

The *merantau* tradition offers a radically different interpretation of gendered space. Claiming that women are agents and decision-makers within the home, Acehnese can point to their *adat* practices as evidence that Acehnese women have power and respect in their domestic

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<sup>187</sup> Istiadah, "Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Investigating Paths to Resist the Patriarchal System" (Centre of Southeast Asia Studies, Monash University: Australia, 1995), 6.

<sup>188</sup> Julia I. Suryakusuma, *Sex, Power and Nation: An Anthology of Writings, 1979-2003* (Jakarta, Indonesia: Metafor Publishing, 2004), 163.

lives; in this way, Acehnese can distance themselves from male-centric Islamic doctrines and nation-state ideologies. Further, this understanding of *merantau* reinforces the notion that Acehnese women are exceptional in the archipelago as independent leaders, a view that is supported by the presence of sultanas and “warrior women” within Acehnese history. This reading of *merantau* thus allows Acehnese to stand apart from other Islamic and Indonesian communities.

I would like to suggest, however, that this understanding of *merantau* also serves a more insidious purpose. Though Acehnese women are positioned as agents as a result of this cultural practice, *merantau* nevertheless reinforces Acehnese women’s associations with domesticity and may contribute to the view that the home is the only “proper” or “acceptable” space for women, particularly when accompanied by conservative religious values. For Arivia and Venny, “The view still holds [in Aceh] that the domestic sphere is the only respected realm for women; this view is located within religious values, particularly in Syariah Islam.”<sup>189</sup> In this sense, traditions that suggest that Acehnese women have *agency* within the domestic realm may simultaneously imply that Acehnese women *belong* in the domestic realm.

### **Matrifocality**

A second Acehnese tradition that has been interpreted as a sign of Acehnese women’s agency is the practice of matrifocal inheritance. In contrast to matrilineal kinship, in which descent is traced solely along the female line, Acehnese adhere to a bilateral kinship system, tracing descent along both the male and female line. However, their residence and inheritance systems are matrifocal, or uxorilocal. Jacqueline Siapno explains, “Residence is uxorilocal

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<sup>189</sup> *Menggalang Perubahan: Perlunya Perspektif Gender dalam Otonomi Daerah* (Jakarta, Indonesia: Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, 2004), 10-11. Indonesian: “Masih terdapat pandangan bahwa ruang domestik adalah satu-satunya ruang kehormatan bagi perempuan, dan itu diletakkan dalam nilai-nilai agama, yakni nilai Syariat Islam itu.”

(centering on the residence of a wife's mother's family). Husbands move to the households and villages of their wives. While this tradition of matrilocality may be practiced in most parts of Aceh, it is especially strong in the regency of Pidie.”<sup>190</sup> James Siegel's research on kinship systems in Aceh gives additional insight into Acehnese matrifocal practices. According to Siegel:

Atjehnese children are born in the house of their mother. The idiomatic expression for wife is, in fact, 'the one who owns the house' (*njang po rumah*). Women acquire a house, or at least a portion of one, at the time of their marriage. The house is a gift from the woman's parents. From marriage until the birth of the first child, or sometimes for a period of three to four years depending on prior arrangements, a bride does not legally own the house. It still belongs to her parents, and during this period she is fully supported by them. At the end of this period there is a small feast (*chanduri*) at which it is announced that the woman is now 'separated' (*geumeukleh*) from her parents. She is given full possession of the house and, if the parents can afford it, a rice field as well. At the birth of every child thereafter the parents try to give their daughter another rice plot [sic].”<sup>191</sup>

Like *merantau*, these matrifocal practices in Aceh have been interpreted as evidence of Acehnese women's agency and power. For Jacqueline Siapno, Acehnese women's status within the domestic sphere is an extension of their roles as “warrior women” and political leaders within Aceh's past. Siapno explains, “from traditional aristocratic kingdoms to post-independent, post-social revolution Aceh, we continue to find powerful women who played important roles in the nationalist struggle... At the village level, we find that women occupy an equally powerful

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<sup>190</sup> Jacqueline Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State in Aceh: The Paradox of Power, Co-optation and Resistance* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2002), 61.

<sup>191</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 51-52.



position: for example, the Acehnese word for ‘wife’ is not ‘house-wife’ but ‘*po rumoh*’ ...meaning ‘owner of the house.’”<sup>192</sup> As a result of their firm hold over the domestic realm, Siapno argues, “It is the women who have the strongest sense of ‘place,’ of belonging and community, and an acute sense of how to ‘position’ oneself in society.”<sup>193</sup> Acehnese men, in contrast, are seen to exist in a state of “non-belonging” and placelessness, a view that is summarized by the oft-cited phrase, “Men are like guests in the houses of their wives.”<sup>194</sup> James Siegel’s research further confirms the hypothesis that men—as children and as husbands—are forever unwelcome in the houses of their mothers and wives. Siegel observes, “from the women’s point of view, the family consists of the people who occupy the house compound—themselves, their sisters, mothers, and children. Their husbands have no place, and hence no right to make decisions...Men are basically adjuncts who exist only to give their families whatever they can earn.”<sup>195</sup> Without a sense of “place” within the domestic sphere, Acehnese men, Siegel argues, have no decision-making power and, as a result, feel deeply dependent upon their wives.<sup>196</sup>

Siapno’s reading of Acehnese matrifocal practices also suggests that this tradition has remained unchanged over time and has not been influenced by other, conflicting ideologies, particularly Islamic doctrines. Though she notes that Islamic teachings position men within the dominant roles of husband, father, and “head-of-household,” Siapno claims, “in Acehnese matrifocal system, the men are relegated to a very marginal role.”<sup>197</sup> In addition, Siapno finds that this balance of power within the Acehnese matrifocal system has remained undisturbed by

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<sup>192</sup> Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State*, 59.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>194</sup> Hurgronje, *The Acehnese*, 327.

<sup>195</sup> Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 177.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>197</sup> Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State*, 61.

the thirty years of separatist conflict. Siapno writes, “loss of one’s husband, father, and other male members of the family has had profoundly traumatic consequences, not just emotionally, but politically and economically for families in Aceh... There has been a social and emotional transformation of the meaning and nature of the family in Aceh. However, I would argue that while this is true, the composition and conception of a household has been fairly resilient—they continue to be the domain of women.”<sup>198</sup>

The view that Acehnese matrifocal practices have afforded women centrality and agency within the domestic sphere and, consequently, contributed to “male marginality,” has also emerged within interpretations of the Acehnese marriage ceremony in which new brides are given ownership of their mother’s house. According to Jayawardena, “men play little part in the customary wedding ceremonies’ which take place in the bride’s home... The groom’s father does not accompany him in the procession to the bride’s house, and only women, children and the bridal pair are involved in the *duduk bersanding*. The new husband stays in the bride’s house for three nights. When she is escorted to meet his mother, the groom and his father are not present. The ceremony symbolizes marriage as being effected between groups of women.”<sup>199</sup> Because the marriage ceremony positions women as central actors and agents, and men as “guests” with little decision-making power, Jayawardena claims that this ceremony is representative of Acehnese women’s agency within village life, an agency that derives from Acehnese traditions. Jayawardena thus views the village as “a world of women,” and views *adat* as “a way of ordering life that gives women preeminence.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>199</sup> Chandra Jayawardena, “Women and Kinship in Aceh Besar, Northern Sumatra,” *Ethnology* 16 (1977): 26, quoted in Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 25.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 26.

The notion that Acehese matrifocal practices offer evidence of Acehese women's agency within the domestic realm must be considered alongside several other factors. First, *adat* is not the only force that structures social life in Aceh. Although Acehese marriage, property and inheritance practices can be characterized as matrifocal, other aspects of Acehese kinship adhere to Islamic values. As a result, Acehese have also "claim[ed] to be patrilineal like the Arabs, a declaration related to their claim for preeminence as Muslim peoples in the archipelago."<sup>201</sup> This suggests that Acehese *adat* and Acehese Islam exist alongside one another, and that emphasizing either practice serves to highlight a different aspect of Acehese identity. Of course, Acehese *adat* does not simply *co-exist* with other practices; it is also shaped by outside forces, particularly the separatist conflict. Despite Siapno's view that the Acehese household continues to be seen as "the domain of women" even after the conflict, other scholars suggest that the amount of "dislocation" and relocation of Acehese populations as a result of the conflict "have undermined the local relationships that supported women's independence and authority in the household."<sup>202</sup>

Second, the existence of matrifocal practices, as with the existence of powerful "warrior" women within Acehese history, is not in itself an indication of Acehese women's agency. Jayawardena's interpretation of the Acehese marriage ceremony, for example, suggests that because women occupy a central role in this ritual, and because men are largely absent during the process, marriage is an area in which Acehese women have control. A closer reading, however, reveals that outside of the ceremony, Acehese women have little decision-making power within the marriage process. According to Jauhari, "selecting the marriage partner is the

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>202</sup> Yulia Immajati, "Not Just an Inong: Acehese Women in the Midst of Conflict and Household Livelihood" (PhD diss., Australian National University, Canberra, 2008), quoted in Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 26.

first accomplishment of the prospective groom and his family before the marriage rituals begin. An Acehnese saying goes, ‘The well does not look for the bucket!’ meaning that the man and his family are responsible for choosing his prospective wife. Marriage is rarely initiated on the woman’s side in Aceh...A rumor that a woman chose her husband makes Acehnese people uncomfortable.”<sup>203</sup> In this sense, male marginality and women’s centrality within the marriage ceremony does not reflect the gendered power dynamics within the marriage process itself, a process that ignores women’s desires and decisions.

The view that matrifocal traditions exemplify Acehnese women’s status as decision-makers and leaders—a status that they have enjoyed since the era of Aceh’s sultanas and colonial battles—is also undermined by contemporary discussions of Acehnese women’s political roles. Despite the fact that symbolic figures like Cut Nyack Dhien and the traditions of *merantau* and matrifocality identify Acehnese women as powerful leaders both in the “public” realm of colonial conflict and the “private” sphere of the home, Azriana claims that Acehnese women are still unable to exercise political power within their daily lives, and “the debate about whether or not Acehnese women can be leaders still is not over.”<sup>204</sup> Identifying a shift in social attitudes towards Aceh’s powerful female figures of the past and attitudes towards contemporary female leaders, Eka Srimulyani also writes:

Many Acehnese men have difficulty in accepting women as leaders, even though women have played an important role historically. During the seventeenth century, when Aceh was at its zenith as a centre of trade and Islamic civilisation, the kingdom of Aceh Darussalam had several female rulers who were respected and admired. Famous

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<sup>203</sup> Jauhari, “The Acehnese Marriage,” 31.

<sup>204</sup> Azriana, “Kepemimpinan Perempuan Aceh: Di Antara Peluang dan Tantangan Lokal” (paper presented at the Aceh Women’s Leadership Conference, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, November 25, 2010). Indonesian: “*Perdebatan tentang boleh tidaknya perempuan Aceh menjadi pemimpin, sepertinya masih belum selesai.*”

religious scholars like Abdurrauf al-Singkili and Nuruddin Ar-Raniry publicly supported the rule of those queens. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some Acehnese women continued to hold leadership positions, even as local leaders or uleebalang (hereditary chiefs). One of the most famous leaders of resistance to the Dutch colonialists, Cut Nyak Dhien, was a woman. This situation seems to have changed since the early twentieth century. Now few women play a public or political leadership role, and many men believe that such a state of affairs is only natural and right. The new hostility to women playing leadership roles was dramatised recently, in late 2010, when a controversy in Bireuen, a district in northern Aceh, attracted worldwide attention. The speaker of the district legislature demanded that the bupati (district head) replace a female camat (subdistrict head) he had appointed in the Plimbang sub-district. The speaker, Ridwan Muhammad of the Partai Aceh (Aceh Party), gave as his reason that Islam does not permit a woman to be a leader. What has happened to change Acehnese attitudes to women leaders? And what are women in Aceh doing to reassert their leadership role?<sup>205</sup>

For Srimulyani, the discrepancy between the symbolic role of Aceh's historical figures and the lived realities of Acehnese women is reflected in male attitudes towards women occupying positions of political power. However, Acehnese women have internalized this sense of inadequacy and, as a result, they themselves lack confidence in their leadership abilities. Reporting on women's political participation in Aceh, UNIFEM observed, "Aceh takes pride in its history of women leaders and heroines, however prevailing cultural and social norms in Aceh regard politics as a male arena. Some religious leaders espouse that women's leadership in

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<sup>205</sup> Eka Srimulyani, "Inspired by History," *Inside Indonesia* 103 (Jan-March 2011), <http://www.insideindonesia.org/feature/inspired-by-history-13011399> (accessed April 25, 2012).

politics is against the codes of Islam. Few women are convinced of the possibility and value of women's engagement in the political arena, and with little support, women rarely see entering politics as a strategic career or political move."<sup>206</sup> For Azriana, it is Aceh's long history of patriarchal values that has deprived women of their self-confidence and contributed to the view that Acehnese women cannot occupy positions of political power in contemporary Aceh.

Azriana writes:

The challenges for Acehnese women's leadership truly lie within society's unwillingness to move away from a patriarchal culture that, for hundreds of years, has caused injustice towards women. This culture is still firmly rooted... Other challenges include women's own lack of confidence to come forward as leaders. In Aceh, there are plenty of women who are intellectually capable, but do not have the desire to nominate themselves as candidates for [political] leadership. A situation like this can, in several circumstances, support the societal stereotype about women's weakness... Women were not born and raised in a vacuum; women were born and raised in a society in which particular rules and values about women are already in place... These existing values condition women to become a passive silhouettes in waiting. Women need the courage to break free from these rules, to show society the capabilities they possess.<sup>207</sup>

While conservative Islamic beliefs and deep-seated patriarchal values have certainly

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<sup>206</sup> "Increasing Women's Political Participation in Aceh," *UNIFEM Summary Report* (May 2009), 1-2.

<sup>207</sup> Azriana, "Kepemimpinan Perempuan Aceh Indonesia." Indonesian: "*Tantangan bagi kepemimpinan perempuan Aceh sesungguhnya adalah ketidakrelaan masyarakat untuk keluar dari budaya patriarki yang selama ratusan tahun telah menyebabkan ketidakadilan terhadap perempuan. Budaya ini terus berurat berakar... Tantangan lainnya adalah ketidakpercayaan diri perempuan untuk tampil sebagai pemimpin. Di Aceh, tidak sedikit perempuan-perempuan yang secara intelektual memiliki kapasitas yang cukup baik, namun tidak punya keinginan mencalonkan diri sebagai pemimpin. Situasi seperti ini dalam beberapa hal bisa mendukung stereotype masyarakat tentang kelemahan perempuan... Perempuan tidak lahir dan dibesarkan dalam ruang hampa, perempuan lahir dan besar dalam masyarakat yang telah memiliki aturan dan nilai-nilai tentang perempuan, yang sebagian besarnya mengkondisikan perempuan menjadi sosok yang pasif dan menunggu. Dibutuhkan keberanian perempuan untuk keluar dari aturan ini dan menunjukkan ke masyarakat potensi yang dimilikinya...*"

limited Acehese women's political opportunities, I argue that Acehese traditions have also played a significant role in undermining women's status as political leaders. First, pointing to Aceh's matrifocal traditions as evidence of Acehese women's agency can serve to mask the extent to which Acehese women are barred from leadership roles. Viewed alongside the practice of *merantau* and the symbolic figures of Cut Nyack Dhien or Cut Meutia, Aceh's matrifocal traditions imply that Acehese women have "always" enjoyed decision-making power; because Acehese *adat* is considered to be "something abiding and incontrovertible, with which that individual may not meddle,"<sup>208</sup> Acehese women's agency may be considered a timeless, incontrovertible fact.

Second, whether or not Acehese women are in fact agents within their domestic lives, Aceh's matrifocal tradition, as with the practice of *merantau*, nevertheless emphasizes women's connection to the domestic sphere. In this way, matrifocal traditions further entrench in Acehese social consciousness the notion that the home and the family is the "proper" domain of women. This analysis offers a partial explanation for Srimulyani and Azriana's observations. When combined with existing patriarchal and conservative Islamic views, I argue, Aceh's matrifocal traditions give additional momentum to the idea that Acehese women's primary responsibilities remain within the "private" sphere of the home. In this way, matrifocal traditions may contribute to Aceh's societal reluctance to accept women as leaders within the "public," or political, sphere.

On the other hand, the belief that Acehese women are powerful leaders and decision-makers does not always serve to support patriarchal values or to reinforce women's connection to the home. As I mentioned in the opening section, I understand tradition as both rigid entities

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<sup>208</sup> Hurgronje, *The Achehnese*, 10.

that signify stability, coherence and singularity, and as fluctuating beliefs and practices. In this way, these same Acehese traditions may also inspire women to vie for political positions or encourage women to take on a more assertive role within their public or private lives. The final section of this chapter will discuss in greater detail the possibilities traditions provide for Acehese to redefine and reconstruct Acehese identity.

## **ACEHNESE PERFORMANCE**

My reading of Acehese *adat* suggests that tradition, like history, can be interpreted and distorted in ways that reinforce prevailing views of Acehese identity, particularly in regards to gender relations and Acehese women's social roles. I have also argued that because traditions are viewed as practices that have not changed over time, they are afforded legitimacy and authority, and in this way, can play a significant role in shaping Acehese social attitudes. My understanding of Aceh's performing arts follows this view of tradition. Aceh's performance practices are believed to have existed for centuries without drastic modification or alteration and are seen to showcase the "inherent" or "essential" qualities of Acehese identity. After giving an overview of Acehese dance, music, and theater traditions, I examine how these performances have been invoked in order to support dominant notions of Acehese identity. I also offer alternative interpretations of Aceh's performance practices.

### **Background**

Like many other Indonesian dance forms, Acehese dance is generally accompanied by music, and Acehese performers are skilled in both forms. For this reason, Margaret Kartomi has coined the terms, "dancer-musician," referring to "artists who are primarily dancers, but also use their bodies as percussive and vocal instruments," and "musician-dancer," which refers to "frame drum musicians who also use their bodies as percussive and vocal instruments between



bouts of frame drum playing and body movement.”<sup>209</sup> Acehese dances are usually performed by a group of either men or women, and are led by a *syeh*, who plans the dancers’ movements and arranges the singing parts before the performance. The *syeh* may also work with two lead vocalists, called *aneuk syahé* (lit. “child of poetry”), who, like the *syeh*, are able to create spontaneous verses. These lead vocalists bring a degree of improvisation into performances that, for Kartomi, have a “disciplined compactness and cyclical structural redundancy,” as the dancers tend to repeat their movement pattern throughout the improvisatory verses.<sup>210</sup>

Acehnese dances have been categorized into “standing” and “sitting” genres. In the standing dances, performers move in an upright position, often moving in and out of geometrical formations.<sup>211</sup> The *seudati* dance, which has both a male and female version, is perhaps the best known of the standing dances, and for Amir, “school children all over Indonesia who have never seen a *seudati* performance have long been taught that *seudati* is *the* traditional dance from Aceh, in much the same way as they are taught that *wayang* is *the* traditional art form from Java.”<sup>212</sup> In the sitting dances, performers kneel on their knees in a tight row. In the *saman*, for example (of which there are many different versions), dancers perform interlocking movements that demand intense concentration from each member in order to achieve the overall effect of unity and precision.<sup>213</sup> Iwan Amir has suggested that the sitting dances may be the most reproducible of the Acehese performing arts because they do not require musical instruments or other

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<sup>209</sup> Kartomi, “Concepts of Space,” 1-2.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>211</sup> For example, the practice of weaving in and out of circular patterns can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KRPe-OitYk>.

<sup>212</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 235-6.

<sup>213</sup> For an example of this interlocking dance pattern, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fnd2VUVeyaU>

equipment, and the songs and movements are easy to learn. Consequently, *saman* can be performed and enjoyed by non-Acehnese individuals.<sup>214</sup>

Unlike Balinese or Javanese female performers who wear tightly wrapped costumes, Acehnese men and women alike wear trousers with a loose shirt and an embroidered hat. The costumes are usually red, yellow, black, white, or a combination of those colors, which, for Kartomi, reflects Acehnese concepts of space. According to this analysis, white is associated with the east, red is associated with the south, yellow reflects the west, and black identifies the north.<sup>215</sup> However, Iwan Amir has suggested that the costumes worn today are mostly the result of the post-colonial government's efforts to "standardize and glamorize" dance performances, and in the past performers would wear a farmer's shirt and a sarong.<sup>216</sup>

As the term "musician-dancer" suggests, Acehnese music is also interwoven with dance performance. For example, the practice of body percussion, in which performers "produce patterns of rhythmic sound by beating on their bodies—chest, shoulders, thighs, and hands—stamping their feet, and snapping their fingers," is mostly performed as a part of dance performances, rather than on its own.<sup>217</sup> For Kartomi, body percussion is one of three sound-producing agents that Acehnese recognize; the others are instruments and the human voice.

Acehnese instruments are classified as "pre-Islamic" (referring to instruments that were in use before Islam was introduced to Aceh in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, primarily of Indian origin), "Islamic" instruments (those brought by Arab and Turkish merchants in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) and "Western" instruments, such as the *biola*, or violin. Though body percussion is identified as an Islamic practice, which Kartomi has observed in some Spanish, Moroccan, and

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<sup>214</sup> Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere," 238.

<sup>215</sup> Kartomi, "Concepts of Space," 9.

<sup>216</sup> Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere," 204.

<sup>217</sup> Kartomi, "Concepts of Space," 1-2.

Middle Eastern dances,<sup>218</sup> the distinctions between “pre-Islamic” and “Islamic” instruments may not be clear, since “Over the centuries, the Acehnese tolerated and combined facets of all the relevant religions in various syncretic combinations, expressions of which are apparent to this day.”<sup>219</sup> Moreover, instruments that are considered “pre-Islamic” may become “acceptable” in the eyes of Aceh’s *ulama* if they are accompanied by the singing of religious verses or the playing of the *rapa’i* (frame drum), which is understood to be a highly spiritual instrument.<sup>220</sup>

Aceh’s “pre-Islamic” instruments include the *geundrang* (the main drum of Aceh Besar, Pidie, and Aceh Utara), the *canang ceureukeh/seureukeh* (xylophones played by Acehnese women in rice-field after work or at home), the *moh-moh/shawm* (a small clarinet-like instrument), the *alèe tunjang* (rice-stamping pole), several wind instruments, such as the *bangsi*, *suleng*, or the *buloh*, and bowed or plucked instruments. As Islam spread throughout Aceh, leading *ulama* developed the idea that some instruments, such as the *rapa’i* drum, were more appropriate for religious worship than others. The distinctions between “pre-Islamic” and “Islamic” instruments were further emphasized during the colonial period, which saw an intense rivalry between Aceh’s *ulama* and *uleebalang*. According to Kartomi, “The *uleebalang* (and Dutch colonial administrators) continued to promote the non-Islamic arts, such as female welcome dances accompanied by the clarinet and drum ensemble, partly as a means of asserting their power against the rival *ulama*, who promoted genres in which Islamic texts were sung accompanied by or in alteration with frame drum ensemble or body percussion. Rivalry between

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<sup>218</sup> Margaret Kartomi, “The Art of Body Percussion and Movement in Aceh and its Links in Countries around the Northern Rim of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean” (paper presented at the Conference on Music in the World of Islam, Asilah, Morocco, August 8-13, 2007), 2.

<sup>219</sup> Margaret Kartomi, “On Metaphor and Analogy in the Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments in Aceh,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 37 (2005): 31.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

the two groups of leaders emphasized the distinctions between the pre-Islamic and Islamic strata.”<sup>221</sup>

Like Acehese dance, some Acehese musical practices are also gender segregated. For example, women tend to play flutes in rice fields and “less portable instruments” (such as xylophones) at home, while men play clarinets and large frame drums in public.<sup>222</sup> These distinctions have been muddled by the influence of Western instruments and musical styles. In recent years, Acehese men and women alike have used electric guitars, keyboards, bongos, and other instruments in their *kreasi baru* (“new creations), which may or may not incorporate Acehese song, texts, or melodies.

Finally, Acehese theater differs considerably from the *wayang* shadow puppet genres of Bali and Java. Known as *hikayat*, which translates as “story” or “tale,” Acehese theater is more accurately described as an oral story-telling genre, which combines singing, dancing, and the reciting of poetry or prose. Siapno observes, “the idea of *reading* in traditional storytelling is a performative act, quite different from our modern idea of *reading*, which is more or less a passive and solitary act. In traditional storytelling, the consumption of *hikayat* is primarily oral and aural, not visual, as it is in the consumption of modern print literature.”<sup>223</sup> In *hikayat*, a single performer, called a *yeh*, uses various techniques, including character impersonation, spontaneous singing, and the use of props, to relate well-known tales or stories. *Hikayat* is not unique to Aceh; as a form of Malay literature, it dates back to the fourteenth century, when poems and other words of respect were carved into stone. Later, *hikayat* narratives were

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>223</sup> Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State*, 73.

developed and embellished through oral performance.<sup>224</sup> According to Amir, early *hikayat* performers in Aceh were essentially wandering minstrels accompanied by small orchestras. Amir explains, “In the *hareubab* orchestra, for example, there is a musician, a male dancer, and another male dancer playing a female role. Each member of the group plays different roles that require different skills. Their abilities are measured not by how much they match one another but rather by how they complement one another.”<sup>225</sup> The Gayo people of Aceh have a similar genre called *didong*, in which a *ceh* (leader) creates performances that blend Gayo or Acehese history with current events. Because *hikayat* and *didong* performances rely heavily upon the use of local languages, they are difficult to transport to other regions of Indonesia, even though, in recent years, some oral story-telling performances have been recorded on electronic media and sold in cities such as Medan and Jakarta.

### **Reinforcing Assumptions**

As my brief introduction to Acehese performance has attempted to show, Acehese performance has emerged from a variety of influences and has been shaped by changes in power dynamics, religious values, and available forms of media. However, in acting as a reflection of a static Acehese identity, Aceh’s performance traditions have been invoked by politicians, scholars, and Acehese artists to confirm the dominant narrative that depicts Acehese as heroic fighters and devout Muslims. Some performance traditions have also been viewed as a reflection of Acehese women’s agency and gender equality in Aceh.

### ***Political Identity***

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<sup>224</sup> Holly Smith, *Aceh: Art and Culture*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 50. For more on Malay literature, see Henk Maier, *We Are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writing* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Press, 2004).

<sup>225</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 33.

In the same way that Acehese histories may be skewed such that militancy and rebelliousness are accentuated within descriptions of Acehese identity, Acehese performance practices can also emphasize these particular traits. According to Margaret Kartomi, a renowned scholar of Indonesian—particularly Sumatran—performing arts, Acehese performance is typically animated and “fiery,” with precise movements executed in simultaneity by multiple performers. For example, the practice of body percussion has been described by Kartomi as “a quintessential part of the people’s construct of their artistic identity, which is Muslim, based on gender segregation, and with many performances that possess a military-like quality of precision and virtuosity, ranging from the fiery, fast and brilliant to the tragic or calm.”<sup>226</sup> UNESCO has also reported that the Acehese performing arts are characterized by “a marching spirit that symbolizes the heroism they possess.”<sup>227</sup>

The themes of war and heroism have been traced to specific dance and musical practices. In the *Perang Sabil* (“Holy War”) dance, for example, Acehese dancers reenact the movements of soldiers during historical battles, particularly the Dutch-Aceh War. The performers carry *rencong* (Acehese swords) and demonstrate how these weapons are to be used in actual battles.<sup>228</sup> The *Daboih* dance<sup>229</sup> also highlights Acehese fighting spirit by showcasing the performers’ ability to withstand pain. *Daboih* performers begin rather slowly and mysteriously, then, in rhythm with the sound of the *rapai’i* drum, they repeatedly stab themselves with swords and other sharp objects. As I watched a *daboih* performance during the PKA-V, Aceh’s 5<sup>th</sup> Cultural Festival, my friend turned to me and joked, “You see? *Orang Aceh suka kekerasan*

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<sup>226</sup> Kartomi, “The Art of Body Percussion,” 1.

<sup>227</sup> Sangeeta Isvaran, “Art and Healing: Post-earthquake Relief Work Using the Performing Arts in Nias, Indonesia” (June 4, 2006), [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=30667&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=30667&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>228</sup> Smith, *Aceh: Art and Culture*, 57.

<sup>229</sup> Also known as *daboh* or *dabus*.

(Acehnese people like violence).” These examples suggest that key aspects of Acehnese identity, including the idea that they are a militant and war-loving people, can be found within Acehnese performance.

### ***Religious Identity***

Acehnese performance can also be seen to reinforce the notion that Acehnese are exceptionally devout or that Acehnese Islam is more conservative, or more violent, than other Islamic practices within Indonesia. For example, many of Aceh’s performing arts practices have Islamic origins, as they were brought to Aceh by Muslim traders who used performance to spread religious messages.<sup>230</sup> Margaret Kartomi explains, “the broad similarity of some of [Aceh’s] movements and genres to those in some other Muslim areas, and the fact that the accompanying song texts often comprise or refer to Muslim themes, suggest to others that aspects of body percussion were originally introduced centuries ago from other parts of the Muslim world, after which a number of unique genres and styles developed in Aceh and Gayo on the basis of indigenous forms.”<sup>231</sup> In addition to the body percussion movement, many Acehnese dances involve kneeling and bowing, a movement that is sometimes accompanied by the recitation of prayer. Acehnese performance can also offer a place to meditate and commune with God, particularly within the sitting genres. In performing sitting dances, performers may enter “a state of trance-like religious concentration, [which can] induce a joyous feeling of unity with the divine, and seem to bring the world into a state of harmony.”<sup>232</sup> These performance styles reflect the notion that Acehnese are always in spiritual connection with God, or that they are more devout than other ethnic groups within Indonesia.

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<sup>230</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 23-24.

<sup>231</sup> Kartomi, “The Art of Body Percussion,” 11.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 3.

Other dances accentuate the perceived connection between Acehese Islamic identity and violence. For example, within the *daboih* dance, in which performers stab themselves with swords or other objects, the performers also assumed to be operating under spiritual guidance or protection, which enables them to achieve invulnerability and commit violence acts.<sup>233</sup> The use of Acehese *hikayat* and other performance genres to inspire violence during the Dutch-Aceh War, the Darul Islam rebellion, and the GAM conflict also suggests that Acehese Islamic identity is strongly linked to violence. The *Hikayat Perang Sabil (HPS)*, for example, which tells of Acehese holy wars, was recited during Aceh's early battles in order to intensify soldiers' fighting spirit. Alfian explains, "The *Hikayat* appears to have been effective in stimulating men, women and children to go to war, even against overwhelmingly superior weapons."<sup>234</sup> The *seudati* dance has also been identified as a tool that inspires Acehese to fight, particularly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century against the Dutch.<sup>235</sup> Even in more recent rebellions, including the GAM conflict, Acehese have turned to their performance practices to rally support.

Finally, the attitudes of Aceh's *ulama* towards Acehese performance reflect the assumption that Acehese Islam is especially conservative or strict. For example, many of Aceh's religious scholars are afraid that the performances could disrupt a devout lifestyle. Some *ulama*, including both Sunni and Syiah leaders, have prohibited the use of pre-Islamic instruments within Acehese mosques, but are more tolerant towards performances that take place in other contexts.<sup>236</sup> Others, such as the more orthodox Wabbahi *ulama*, believe that the use of such instruments "can distract people from prayer and work and lead them into illicit

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<sup>233</sup> Kartomi, "Concepts of Space," 40.

<sup>234</sup> Teuku Ibrahim Alfian, "Aceh and the Holy War (*Prang Sabil*)," in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 111-113.

<sup>235</sup> Sal Murgiyanto, *Dance of Indonesia* (New York, NY: Festival of Indonesia Foundation, 1991), 23.

<sup>236</sup> Kartomi, "On Metaphor and Analogy," 35.



activity, especially involving sex and alcohol.”<sup>237</sup> In this way, regulations of Acehese performance imposed by *ulama* can be seen as a reflection of Aceh’s more conservative Islamic identity.

### ***Gender Relations***

The view that Acehese women are powerful leaders who have the same opportunities as men has also been linked to Acehese performing arts practices. The image of Aceh’s “warrior women,” for example, can be found within several dance and musical genres. According to Kartomi, the ideal sound and physical presentation for both male and female performers is “heroic, high-spirited and fiery, in accordance with the history and daily life of Acehese society.”<sup>238</sup> The *Prang Sabillillah* dance, a female version of the *Perang Sabil* dance, also depicts women warriors whose movements recreate the defeat of Dutch colonists.<sup>239</sup> Further, the *buloh meurindu*, a pipe that is used to express longing, has been associated with female heroism, playing songs about “longing for love or freedom, heroism, war, religion, legends and so on,” and for Kartomi, “the *buloh meurindu* is to the female voice as a heroine is to victory.”<sup>240</sup>

Some scholars have also suggested that women can emerge as powerful figures within Acehese *hikayat* traditions. Examining the performances of Adnan PM Toh, for example, Ari Jauhari finds that women are able to dominate their husbands within domestic space. Because the female characters in Adnan’s performance claim they will beat their husbands if they come home late or do not adequately contribute to the family, Jauhari writes, “all male characters were presented as the superior outside their home...[but] when it came to the house, women took over

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>238</sup> Kartomi, “The Art of Body Percussion,” 10.

<sup>239</sup> International Rescue Committee, “IRC Helps Aceh Dance Troupe Get Back on Its Feet,” March 3, 2006.

<sup>240</sup> Kartomi, “On Metaphor and Analogy,” 44.

the power.”<sup>241</sup> This reading of *hikayat* reflects the view that Acehese women have control within the domestic realm.

Finally, my conversations with Acehese artists have suggested that men and women have equal opportunities within Acehese performing arts. For example, Acehese artists consistently claim that the practice of gender segregation within Acehese dance or the restrictions *ulama* have imposed upon performances can be seen as a reflection of Acehese tradition and/or Acehese Islamic identity, and do not discriminate against Acehese women in any way. Marzuki Hasan (“Pak Uki”), a well-known Acehese dance performer and instructor, offers a typical explanation of the relationship between gender, *adat*, and Islam within Aceh’s performing arts. When I asked Uki to discuss the bans *ulama* have placed on Acehese performance, he replied, “It’s been forbidden before by *ulama*, or by *teungku* or *ustad* in the past...but what was forbidden was not the arts, [it was] the ‘excess.’ For example, the competitions [would take place] from evening until sunrise...That you can’t do [because], as a Muslim, you won’t be able to perform the early morning prayers...Also, in the past, men and women have been separated within traditional Acehese dance and movement. But if a new dance is developed, we must create distance between them: the woman dances over there, and the male over here. But in traditional dance, men and women cannot mix.”<sup>242</sup>

According to Uki’s explanation, *ulama* have placed bans on Acehese performance solely for the purpose of upholding the Muslim obligation to pray, while the practice of gender

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<sup>241</sup> Ari Palawi, “Aceh’s Indigenous Performance: A Case of Adnan’s Hikayat-Story Performance” (February 6, 2011), <http://www.globethics.net/web/guest/overall-search/title/Aceh%27s-Indigenous-Performance-4372118> (accessed April 25, 2012), 11.

<sup>242</sup> Marzuki Hasan, interview by author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 29, 2010. Indonesian: “*Pernah dilarang oleh ulama, atau oleh teungku atau ustad lama di sana, di Aceh. Sebenarnya...yang dilarang itu bukan keseniannya, sebenarnya. Excess. Excess jadi keseniannya, misalnya, pertandingan dari sore hari sampai terbit...Itu tidak boleh, kan? Sebagai seorang Muslim...salat subuh ngak ada. Juga, di tari adat laki-perempuan dulu ada pemisahannya, dalam tari, gerakan Aceh. Tapi kalau ada sebuah pemngembangan, kita harus bikin jarak—kalaupun dia menari, yang perempuan di sana, yang laki, sini...Tapi yang tradisinya tidak ada laki-laki perempuan campur menari, ngak.*”

segregation is attributed to Acehese tradition. Barbara Metcalf's analysis of Javanese *wayang* also argues that the restrictions *ulama* have placed on performance function primarily to maintain Islamic values. In this view, *ulama* might object to performances because “it is against the *shari'ah* to waste money,’ ‘to go into debt unnecessarily,’ ‘to create a venue where men and women mix inappropriately,’ ‘to absorb people in activities that distract them from required worship,’ and so forth.”<sup>243</sup> Many Acehese artists and scholars also claim that the restrictions *ulama* place on performance affect men and women equally. In this way, the practice of gender segregation and the extent to which Acehese *ulama* have regulated Acehese performance practices are considered to reflect Acehese *adat* and Acehese Islam and are not seen to disadvantage or target women.

### **The Uses and Abuses of Tradition**

Although Acehese performance practices can be interpreted in ways that support dominant assumptions about Acehese political and religious identity as well as prevailing views of gender relations in Aceh, there are many other ways of understanding Acehese performance traditions. For example, despite the emphasis on war and military heroism within Acehese dance, music and *hikayat*, these are not the only themes that emerge; instead, many of the dances involve community ritual practices and aspects of everyday life. While the Tarek Pukat, or “pulling the net” dance incorporates the activities and methods of fishermen, performances of Alee Unjang recreate the practice of pounding rice and incorporate a mortar and pestle within the dance.<sup>244</sup> The *seudati* dance has also been deemed “more naturalistic than religious” and has in

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<sup>243</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, “Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia: History, Community, Morality,” in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatic (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 316.

<sup>244</sup> Smith, *Aceh: Art and Culture*, 58.

previous years attempted to depict Acehese agricultural life.<sup>245</sup> Amir explains, “before the post-colonial governments’ efforts to standardize and glamorize *seudati* performances, the dancers’ costumes simply consisted of a farmer’s shirt and a sarong. The dance movements and the accompanying songs...are also based on daily farm life experience.”<sup>246</sup> Sailing and the tradition of *merantau* has also been an important aspect of Acehese life. It is not surprising, then, that several Acehese sitting dances and their accompanying song lyrics express a longing for home and a desire to return to one’s village.<sup>247</sup>

The Islamic origins of many of Aceh’s performance genres, the use of prayer within dance movements and song lyrics, and the attitudes of Aceh’s religious authorities towards Aceh’s performing arts have served to reinforce the idea that Acehese are exceptionally devout or that Acehese Islam is especially conservative and violent. However, there are many different ways of characterizing the relationship between Aceh’s performing arts and Islam. First, although the singing of prayers or the playing of particular instruments is said to enable Acehese performers to commit acts of violence and withstand pain within military battles, these same performance activities can also result in the formation of communal bonds and religious “brotherhoods.” Kartomi explains:

In the latter half of the second millennium, strong Sufi influences among both Sunni and Syiah believers have resulted in the establishment of brotherhoods (*tarikat*, Ar. *tariqah*) throughout Aceh, formed from the sixteenth century or earlier and exemplified by the *rapa’i geurimpeng*, *rapai pulot* and *rapa’i daboh* frame drum genres mentioned below.

The men of a village would join groups...[in which they] played their frame drums

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<sup>245</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 204.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 205.

(*rapa'i*) and sang religious songs of praise in each other's homes on Thursday or Friday evenings, on holy days, and at weddings and other celebrations. The enthusiastic local acceptance of the brotherhoods and the exciting forms of religious exercises associated with them certainly promoted an emotional attachment to Islam in Acehese communities.<sup>248</sup>

In this sense, the influence of Islam upon Acehese performing arts can serve either to intensify military spirit or to strengthen peaceful bonds among village members; in both cases, Acehese are unified through their shared belief in and experience of their Muslim identity.

It is also important to note that entering into trance and performing violent acts occurs in other Indonesian dances, such as the Balinese Barong dance. As part of the Barong performance, dancers go into a trance in order to protect themselves from the evil spirit Rangda, and attempt to kill her with their daggers (*keris*). However, Rangda's magic is too powerful and the dancers end up turning their daggers on themselves. Despite repeatedly stabbing themselves, Barong dancers are assumed to be protected from harm because they are in a trance.<sup>249</sup> Although the Balinese Barong performance bears marked similarity to the Acehese *daboih* dance, the Balinese, who practice Balinese Hindu, are not widely associated with violence in their dances, their rituals, or their history.<sup>250</sup> This example further proves that cultural dances do not simply reflect the characteristics of an ethnic group, but that they are selectively chosen, emphasized, and interpreted to enforce particular constructions of cultural identity.

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<sup>248</sup> Kartomi, "On Metaphor and Analogy," 34.

<sup>249</sup> Wayan Dibia and Rucina Ballinger, *Balinese Dance, Drama and Music: A Guide to the Performing Arts of Bali* (Singapore: Periplus Editions, 2004), 72-72.

<sup>250</sup> For more on the construction of Balinese identity, see Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), and Michel Picard, "Tourism, Nation-Building, and Culture: The Making of a Balinese Identity," in *Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies*, eds. Michel Picard and Robert E. Wood (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 181-214.

Second, although Acehnese tend to emphasize their performance traditions' connection to Islam, Acehnese performance has been shaped by a range of influences, including Chinese, Hindu, and animist elements.<sup>251</sup> Kartomi explains, "Over the centuries, the Acehnese tolerated and combined facets of all the relevant religions in various syncretic combinations, expressions of which are apparent to this day."<sup>252</sup> Further, the degree to which Aceh's performing arts signify Islamic affiliations is likely to shift as a result of political and societal forces. For example, it is only within the past one hundred years or so that having a reputation for Islamic devotion has brought Acehnese a sense of pride and distinction, which has led Aceh's religious authorities to emphasize the Islamic origins of Acehnese performance or to ignore signs of a pre-Islamic past.<sup>253</sup> Emphasizing Islamic elements within performance practices has also been a means to get past *ulama* censorship requirements, which have fluctuated over time. Amir explains, "Given that the writings of orthodox Islam generally disapprove of the performing arts, it is likely that Acehnese artists and art patrons adopted survival strategies for the arts to gain the stamp of approval from the religious authorities by claiming that they all either have an Islamic origin and derived from the Middle East, or were adapted to Islamic precepts by Muslim artists."<sup>254</sup> Thus, at the same time that Aceh's performing arts can be viewed as a reflection of Acehnese Islamic identity, they also permit the reconstruction of this identity to fit particular historical visions.

Finally, the extent to which Acehnese performance traditions signify the powerful status of Acehnese women or equal gender relations within Acehnese society deserves more careful consideration. Although Acehnese women may emerge as strong and autonomous heroines

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<sup>251</sup> Smith, *Aceh: Art and Culture*, 54.

<sup>252</sup> Kartomi, "On Metaphor and Analogy," 31.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>254</sup> Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere," 204.

within some performance practices, representations of femininity within other Acehnese arts forms have emphasized refinement and subservience. The *Pho* dance, which is a slow, sad dance originally intended to mourn the death of a leader, is performed exclusively by women. Today, the dance is performed at weddings to memorialize the life of the bride with her parents before she is passed on to her new family. This dance suggests that a warrior-like femininity in Aceh is not the only ideal, but that women should also express “refinement and softness.”<sup>255</sup>

Jacqueline Siapno’s reading of Acehnese *hikayat* also suggests that women are not always presented in positions of power and agency within Aceh’s performance traditions. Siapno explains, “in the conventions of the *hikayat* tradition, the queen is usually eliminated from the story after fulfilling her procreative function—giving birth to the heir to the throne. After she has delivered the babies, she usually disappears from the text.”<sup>256</sup> As queens and mothers—that is, as “real” people—Acehnese women have little presence within *hikayat* tales; however, Siapno finds that women are afforded greater respect and power when represented as mythical figures or when their characters are associated with the “supernatural” realm. For example, in examining the *Hikayat Aceh*, which describes the early life of Sultan Iskandar Muda, Siapno argues, “this narrative hagiography of extraordinarily brilliant boys does not seem to exist for girls;” however, “the representation of female supernaturalness embodies a different form of Power—that of maternal ancestor or mother-goddesses... While political power is predominantly (but not exclusively) the domain of men... supernatural ancestors are the domain of the female.”<sup>257</sup> This analysis of female characters within Acehnese *hikayat* resonates with my discussion of Aceh’s four queens, Cut Nyack Dhien, and other “warrior women” in Chapter 1.

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<sup>255</sup> Kartomi, “The Art of Body Percussion,” 10.

<sup>256</sup> Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State*, 77.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

Though these women have been praised for their strength, bravery, and leadership capabilities, Clavé-Çelik correctly observes that these women are reduced to archetypes while “real” women are not similarly lauded for occupying positions of power and are often excluded from Acehnese history. In this way, Acehnese *hikayat* tales suggest that powerful Acehnese women are acceptable only as characters, archetypes, or mythical figures.

The view that Acehnese women are in no way targeted or disadvantaged by the Acehnese “tradition” of gender segregation or the restrictions *ulama* have placed upon Acehnese performance must also be reexamined.<sup>258</sup> For example, performances of *seudati*, a dance that has been particularly controversial for Islamic leaders, have been banned at different moments in Acehnese history due to “their often brazen improvised texts, their audiences allegedly breaking the rule of strict gender segregation, and their rivalry with the chieftains (*uleebalang*), who promoted *seudati*, as a power group.”<sup>259</sup> In the early 1950s, *ulama* banned *seudati*, believing that performances of the dance were ‘immoral.’<sup>260</sup> Though scholars have suggested that male and female performers were equally affected by these bans, it is only female performances of *seudati* that have been considered “immoral” and subject to revisions. Kartomi explains, “The *ulama* discouraged female performances and practices for ostensibly moral reasons. Banned in the rebellious Darul Islam insurgency during the early days of the Indonesian Republic...performances were allowed again [in 1972] after *seudati inong* had been given the more pious name of *laweuet*...Many *ulama* were still teaching that it is immodest and irreligious

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<sup>258</sup> Similar restrictions have been placed on dances considered to be too “vulgar” or “sexy” in Hindu Bali. The *Joged Pingitan*, for example, was developed as an alternative to the *Joged*, in which the dancers flirt with audience members and may incorporate “sassy,” “sexy” or “raunchy” moves. In contrast, performers of the *Joged Pingitan* “are not allowed to dance vulgarly or to flirt with the dancer.” See Dibia and Ballinger, *Balinese Dance, Drama and Music*, 86-87.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>260</sup> Kartomi, “On Metaphor and Analogy,” 34.



for females to appear on stage for mixed audiences.”<sup>261</sup> Iwan Amir also notes, “The female *seudati* dance is performed in Jakarta and taught at IKJ, but it is still banned in Aceh, or performed under a different guise (e.g. deliberately misnamed as *pho*, which is a different dance altogether), while in the diaspora it is combined with or treated as a prelude to the female sitting dance.”<sup>262</sup>

In addition to the unequal degree of scrutiny to which female performers have been subjected, my research also suggests that Acehnese women do not enjoy the same access to performance opportunities as men. Though most of the Acehnese artists I spoke with felt that Acehnese performance welcomes boys, girls, men and women, Yusrizal Ibrahim argues that social attitudes in Aceh can restrict women’s performance opportunities, particularly at the professional level. Ibrahim explains, “In Aceh, being a professional female artist is very unconventional. If there are one or two women who choose that profession, society’s view of them is very negative. They are often referred to as *inong biduen* [female entertainers], which means they are ‘comfort women.’ And, there is not a single family in Aceh who is ready to accept such *inong biduen* as their daughter-in-law.”<sup>263</sup> As a result of these societal attitudes, Ibrahim concludes, “in Aceh... women do art only as a hobby, to fill free time during their school years. When they finish school and have a household, all arts activities are quickly abandoned. Only one or two people persist in these activities, training in *sanggar* and in schools.”<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Kartomi, “The Art of Body Percussion,” 5.

<sup>262</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 238.

<sup>263</sup> Yusrizal Ibrahim, “Elly Zuarni: Meniti Seni di Tengah Badai Aceh,” *Journal of Indonesian Performing Arts* 12(2003-2004): 161-62. Indonesian: “Di [Provinsi Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam] profesi seniwati sangat tidak lazim. Kalau pun ada satu dua orang wanita yang memilih profesi itu, pandangan masyarakat terhadap mereka sangatlah negatif. Mereka itu kerap disebut sebagai inong biduen (wanita biduan) yang artinya adalah wanita penghibur. Dan, tidak ada satu keluarga pun di Aceh yang bersedia menerima inong biduen tersebut sebagai menantu.”

<sup>264</sup> Ibrahim, “Elly Zuarni,” 162. Indonesian: “Di Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam... para wanita berkesenian hanya sebagai hobi pengisi waktu luang pada usia masih sekolah. Ketika mereka selesai sekolah dan berumah tangga,

Although there may not be explicit rules that forbid women from performing, social attitudes send the message that women's performance activities can only be "for fun," and that Acehnese women are unwelcome as professionals within the field of the arts.

Agus Nur Amal, a well-known Acehnese *hikayat* performer, has made a similar observation regarding women's involvement in the *hikayat* performance. When I asked Agus if there were any female *hikayat* performers I could visit in Aceh, he replied that he knew of only three women, all of whom live in Meulaboh. According to Agus, these women's careers as successful performers have caused conflict within their romantic relationships. Agus explains:

Ceh Pho, a woman about 50 years old, has, as far as I know, been divorced three times. Maybe because of poor economic [circumstances/standing]. Her previous husband was a *becak* driver...But now she had married again. Ceh Pho has a very nice voice. When improvising a story, Ceh Pho discuss the problems of living in Meulaboh, family problems, etc. This is presented through dancing. Ceh Pho can make an audience cry when she talks about the history of a person who has died. Why did she divorce a couple of times? I think it was because her husband was jealous of her expertise...Ceh Nu is 45 years old, a pretty woman. She has her own *sanggar* [workshop] in Meulaboh. She is very well known as a *ceh*, a lead dancer or singer who accompanies the shaman dancing...I have seen her performance a couple of times in Meulaboh. Her voice is very nice. Then, because of her activity in public, her husband got envious. Her husband is a *becak* driver and they would always quarrel about their relationship. On many occasions,

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*semua aktivitas kesenian segera ditinggalkan. Hanya satu dua orang saja yang menekuni kegiatan ini sebagai pelatih di sanggar-sanggar dan sekolah-sekolah."*

Ceh Nu wanted to separate. But it will not happen. Ceh Nu sometimes phones me about this problem.”<sup>265</sup>

Agus’ account of Ceh Pho and Ceh Nu suggests that Acehese women are not only limited as professional dancers; they are also unwelcome within the realm of *hikayat* theatrical performance. Whether eliciting envy from their husbands or condemnation from community members for their status as disreputable “comfort women,” female performers in Aceh clearly face more obstacles than men. This analysis, however, rarely emerges within discussions of gender and Acehese performing arts. Instead, scholars and Acehese artists alike perpetuate the belief that regulations imposed upon Acehese performers and performances result from Acehese *adat* and Islamic values, and that these regulations have equal implications for men and women.

### **PERFORMING A DIFFERENT STORY**

My analysis of Acehese traditions, including *merantau*, matrilocality, and Acehese dance, music, and theater practices, has suggested that tradition can be a site in which dominant understandings of Acehese identity are reinforced and reinvigorated. Though these narratives of Acehese identity can bring cultural pride to Acehese, such as the view that Acehese are particularly heroic or devout, these narratives can also serve to obscure the complexity of Acehese identity, to emphasize women’s connection to the domestic sphere, and point to a “tradition” of gender equality that does not exist in contemporary Aceh. As I will discuss throughout this dissertation, however, Acehese traditions—specifically, the performing arts—have many different functions and hold significance for Acehese for a variety of reasons. At the same time that Aceh’s performance practices may communicate particular assumptions about

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<sup>265</sup> Agus Nur Amal, email message to author, November 26, 2010.

Acehnese identity and Acehnese society, the arts also provide a space in which to challenge dominant narratives, critique political and religious policies, and reconstruct Acehnese identity.

Much like Javanese *wayang* shows, Sumatran *randai* theater, and other Indonesian performance practices, Acehnese performing arts have offered a space for expressing social and political criticism. Within *saman* dance performances, for example, Acehnese saw an opportunity to voice their concerns about the Dutch government, and as a result, the dance was banned during the colonial period. According to Sal Murgiyanto, however, the ban “did not stop the Acehnese from either continued creative activity or political resistance.”<sup>266</sup> More recently, Acehnese performing artists have addressed issues relating to the New Order government, the GAM conflict, and the tsunami. The Aceh Student Solidarity group, in collaboration with several other arts groups from across the archipelago, performed in Jakarta in April and May of 1999 to call attention to the government’s human rights abuses towards particular ethnic groups, including Chinese-Indonesians, East Timorese, Papuans and Acehnese. Some of the dances performed had been banned under the New Order.<sup>267</sup> Reviving these dances thus enabled the performers to directly confront political policies that marginalize these populations, and many performances were accompanied by discussions about East Timorese and West Papuan independence.<sup>268</sup>

Similarly, the Acehnese story-telling genre, *hikayat*, is an effective medium for expressing social criticism and establishing a forum for debate about typically taboo or sensitive topics. Agus Nur Amal, also known as PM Toh, is an Acehnese performer who addresses such

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<sup>266</sup> Murgiyanto, *Dance of Indonesia*, 22.

<sup>267</sup> The *barongsai* dance, for example, was banned for its “Chinese cultural derivations.” See Sumit Mandal, “Creativity in Protest: Arts Workers and the Recasting of Politics and Society in Indonesia and Malaysia,” in *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia*, eds., Ariel Heryanto and Sumit Mandal (New York and London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 187.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

topics as the GAM conflict, the tsunami, and Acehese elections within his solo performances. Amal claims, “*Hikayat* is a reflection of Acehese social life because it is constantly adapting to the current era.”<sup>269</sup> Though Amal claims that many of his stories are “innocent” kids’ tales, they often reference political and military events, and it was after creating the *Hikayat Tsunami* (“Tale of the Tsunami”) that Amal’s popularity grew.<sup>270</sup> Bringing his traveling theater shows to street children, villages, and laborers, Agus Nur Amal’s performances open the door to conversations about difficult topics, defying the kinds of repressive military tactics that Acehese faced during the GAM conflict.<sup>271</sup> He also challenges the idea that serious political discussion is reserved for “serious” settings (i.e., government offices or news channels), inviting audiences to reflect on their daily experiences through metaphor and humor.

Another popular performance practice that may encourage communal dialogue and provide a space in which to re-imagine Acehese identity is the *tunang*, in which dance teams perform various *saman* dances in competition with each other. Each dance group is led by a *syeh*, who directs the rhythm and is responsible for keeping the group together. In some cases, the *tunang* performances have strict rules. For example, some *tunang* specify that no *saman* dance can be performed twice. In this case, one dance troupe might try to perform a *saman* that is perceived to be the other troupe’s strength so that they will not have a chance to perform it. The *tunang* performances also include improvisatory sections in which the *syeh* sings made-up lyrics in order to show off his sense of humor or vocal skill. As one *syeh* explained, “When it

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<sup>269</sup> *Aktor Teatre PM Toh*, <http://www.tamanismailmarzuki.com/tokoh/toh.html> (accessed April 25, 2012).

Indonesian: “*Hikayat adalah cermin hidup masyarakat Aceh karenanya selalu berubah sesuai kondisi zaman.*”

<sup>270</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 235.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

comes to songs, at least in the villages, you can sing practically anything, even rude words and expletives.”<sup>272</sup>

The extent to which this is true can be found in the documentary *Seudati: Percakapan Dengan Seniman* (Seudati: Conversations with Artists), which highlights a *tunang* performed during the fourth Acehese Cultural Festival (*Pekan Kebudayaan Aceh*, or PKA) in 2004. As the male dancers circle around the stage, their *syeh* launches into a story about “getting laid” and going to “Dorce’s home” (Dorce is a famous transvestite). The *syeh* adds other lewd lyrics, which produce loud laughter and clapping from the audience, including: “Tempted by a fucking summer bird...we go to the field, look around for some tits to liven things up. We have sex with women...plow the field...I’m going to play in the garden until I’m satisfied...I’m going to grope every fruit too...A loud scream at the end of the night screaming loudly at night...oh, which girl was it?”<sup>273</sup> The audience—which is mixed—is largely entertained by these lyrics, cheering on the *syeh* and applauding his rhymes. The dancers continue monotonously, letting the *syeh*’s lyrics take center stage. According to Amir, “The most popular artists, those whose reputations are widely known by the public and whose performances are always in high demand, play a cat-and-mouse game by inserting provocative, subversive, and even lewd messages into their lyrics when the [religious] authorities are not looking. This is the main attraction for an audience, as it waits to anticipate each new surprise.”<sup>274</sup>

When part of the PKA festivals, *tunang* are government-supported and do not follow strict rules about gender segregation. In this regard, they may be important sites in which to explore alternative constructions of gender, sexual, religious, or ethnic identity. However, the

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<sup>272</sup> *Seudati: Percakapan Dengan Seniman*. DVD, dir. Iwan Amir (Monash University, 2005).

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 34.

*tunang* described above—in which a group of male performers makes jokes about the promiscuity or expendability of women for a predominantly male audience—does not offer a significant challenge to existing patriarchal ideologies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has explored the ways in which Acehese traditions, including dance, music, and theater practices, can reinforce and reinvigorate dominant assumptions about Acehese identity. In supporting the idea that Acehese are heroic and independent fighters or exceptionally devout and even violent Muslims, for example, Acehese traditions obscure other ways of understanding Acehese identity. Moreover, in giving greater momentum to the notion that Acehese women are agents and decision-makers, or that gender equality is present within Acehese performance practices, traditions can mask the extent to which Acehese women are excluded from positions of power and from performance opportunities within their daily lives.

Despite these pernicious functions of tradition, I have also argued that Acehese traditions—particularly performance—can offer opportunities to challenge prevailing assumptions about Acehese identity, to critique repressive military policies and political ideologies, and to undermine patriarchal attitudes towards gender roles. In this way, Acehese performance may offer a powerful tool for self-expression and resistance. The following chapter investigates these and other functions of Aceh's performing arts within a context of trauma and healing.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **Transforming Trauma: Performance and Healing in Aceh**

We had been driving around for almost an hour, hurtling over rocks and crashing through thick chunks of dried mud. Wilmar wasn't fazed by these obstacles; he maintained control of the wheel with his right hand while his left hand punched numbers into his cell phone. Six times he had called his friends for directions and at the end of each call he gave me a reassuring nod. "Yes, yes, I know where it is now. It's on the other side of the bridge." But then we would pass a familiar tree or drive through ruts made, most likely, by our own tires. I didn't mind. I still had another month in Aceh. Perhaps there would be other opportunities to watch a dance rehearsal for tsunami-affected children.

After the seventh call, Wilmar confirmed that we were in fact heading in the wrong direction. He turned the van around and started down another dirt path, this time with renewed confidence. Miraculously, the path opened up into a small village where two vans were parked in front of a covered stage. One of the vans bore a Caritas France logo. The other belonged to Jamal Abdullah. Jamal was one of the directors of Taloe, the Acehnese arts group responsible for organizing and conducting the rehearsal. As I exited Wilmar's car and walked towards the stage, I felt an increasing number of eyes focus upon me. The children gathered on stage (there were about fifteen of them) giggled and poked each other as they watched me approach. Their parents, below, also turned their gazes towards me. Then there were the two men from Caritas France who stared at me with a mixture of fascination and disbelief.

Curiosity got the better of them and they by-passed formal introductions. "Who are you? What brings you here?" they asked.

But here, I hesitated. Though these gentlemen knew nothing at all about me, I knew that they, as members of Caritas France, were providing funding for Taloe's activities and that this



funding was scheduled to run out in December (it was August, 2009). I also knew that they were conducting an evaluation—beginning with this very rehearsal—to determine if an additional year of funding could be allocated. If I told them about my research, I feared they would want to see “proof,” evidence, facts and figures confirming that performance was an effective tool for trauma recovery in Aceh—that is, confirming that their money had been well spent. And at that point, I had no such “proof.”

I decided to give them the short explanation of my research, but this was enough to inspire an onslaught of inquiries. “Why do you think that performance can help with trauma? How does it work? Did you measure levels of PTSD in the communities? Did you interview doctors? How will you know if dancing has made any difference? When will you know?”

Even after conducting interviews, observing dance rehearsals, and performing in art-based “healing” activities myself, I still cannot offer concrete answers to many of these questions. After all, specific notions of “trauma” and “healing” that are embedded within NGO recovery programs may diverge from the ways in which Acehnese understand and approach trauma recovery. Moreover, what constitutes “healing” for one Acehnese individual may be radically different from the practices and beliefs that help another Acehnese person deal with his/her traumatic emotions. This chapter, therefore, does not attempt to provide the kinds of answers or “facts” that the men from Caritas France were looking for. Instead, it offers my evaluation of several different “performance-healing efforts,” or attempts to use Acehnese performance traditions to address feelings of trauma experienced by Acehnese survivors of the conflict and the tsunami. Through my analysis of specific performance-healing activities, I offer a more nuanced account, rather than a definitive conclusion, of the limitations and advantages of using performance for trauma recovery in Aceh.

The first half of this chapter grapples with the multiple, contested meanings and assumptions carried by the terms “trauma” and “healing.” After situating these terms within a larger theoretical context, I then articulate my own understanding of trauma and healing as it pertains to the conflict and the tsunami in Aceh. I also elaborate on how these events produced gendered traumas in Aceh—that is, effects and experiences of trauma that differ for Acehnese men and women. The remainder of this section investigates how the conflict and the tsunami affected Acehnese performance practices.

In the second half of this chapter, I evaluate three different types of “performance-healing” efforts in Aceh. First, I examine programs created by international NGOs (INGOs). Though these programs occasionally collaborated with local NGOs, they were structured according to the goals of the international organization and were implemented primarily by foreign workers. Second, I look at programs and performances created by local NGOs. These are groups that employed local artists and volunteers, though they may have received funding from an international organization. Finally, I examine how individual artists have attempted to heal Acehnese communities through performance activities. My discussion of these performance-healing efforts aims to address their benefits for conflict and tsunami survivors as well as their limitations. However, I am also concerned with the extent to which these performance-based trauma recovery efforts are able to address the diverse healing needs of Acehnese men and women, and the degree to which Acehnese men and women find these methods beneficial.

### **TRAUMA AND THE ARTS IN ACEH (1976-2011)**

What is trauma? What does it mean to have experienced trauma as an Acehnese woman living in Pidie at the height of the conflict, or as an Acehnese boy living in Banda Aceh days

after the tsunami destroyed the city? Further, what does it mean to recover from trauma? How and for whom is recovery possible?

The following section engages these questions through a nuanced analysis of the terms “trauma” and “healing.” I also elaborate upon the gendered effects of the conflict and the tsunami for Acehnese, suggesting that recovery methods must address different experiences of gendered trauma. Finally, this section discusses how the performing arts in Aceh were affected by the conflict, the tsunami, and the aftermath of these events, particularly, the implementation of *syariah* law.

### **Untangling Trauma Discourses**

The term “trauma” is often used to refer to two distinct experiences. In medical discourse, trauma refers to “a blow to the tissues of the body...that results in injury or some other disturbance.”<sup>275</sup> In recent years, however, the study of trauma has expanded outside the bounds of medical and psychological professions and has been explored from socio-cultural perspectives. These perspectives often refer to trauma as an event or experience that resists precise definition, and instead relies on felt experience to convey its nature. For example, Peggy Phelan has named trauma “an event of unliving. The unliving event becomes traumatic precisely because it is empty; the trauma reveals an absence, the intangible center of breath itself.”<sup>276</sup> For Cathy Caruth as well, trauma, or “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur,” can be identified as an “unclaimed experience,” which is marked by unknowability.<sup>277</sup> Viewing trauma as an experience that defies

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<sup>275</sup> Kai Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 183.

<sup>276</sup> Peggy Phelan, “Dance and the History of Hysteria,” in *Corporealities: Body, Knowledge, Culture and Power*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (London: Routledge, 1996), 95.

<sup>277</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Traumatic Awakenings,” in *Performance and Performativity*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), 89.

definition, these theorists also suggest that there is no concrete or singular way to treat, address, or “cure” trauma. Though trauma is often described as a feeling that one must overcome, or recover from, Ann Cvetkovich notes that traumatic events can linger long after their initial impact, and the notion that “the trauma survivor will finally tell all and receive the solace of being heard by a willing and supportive listener” is nothing more than a “melodramatic fantasy.”<sup>278</sup>

Trauma theorists who have examined trauma from a cultural studies perspective have also pointed out that traumatic experience is socially constructed. Alexander et al explain, “events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution. The attribution may be made in real time, as an event unfolds; it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the fact; events that are deeply traumatizing may not actually have occurred at all; such imagined events, however, can be as traumatizing as events that have actually occurred.”<sup>279</sup> This view suggests that trauma does not always result as a sequential response to an event; instead, the moment at which and the extent to which an event becomes traumatic depends upon individual experience.

One of the most important contributions to trauma studies, however, is the notion that trauma does not always appear in the form of large-scale, recognizable catastrophes, such as natural disasters or political warfare. Theorists have thus aimed to draw attention to the “unseen” and “everyday” traumas that are often excluded from depictions and analyses of trauma. Investigating sexual trauma as an example of “invisible” trauma, Ann Cvetkovich explains, “sometimes the impact of sexual trauma doesn’t seem to measure up to that of

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<sup>278</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>279</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander et al, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 8.

collectively experienced historical events, such as war and genocide. Sometimes it seems invisible because it is confined to the domestic or private sphere. Sometimes it doesn't appear sufficiently catastrophic because it doesn't produce dead bodies or even, necessarily, damaged ones... I want to place moments of extreme trauma alongside moments of everyday emotional distress that are often the only sign that trauma's effects are still being felt."<sup>280</sup> Following Cvetkovich, my understanding of trauma in Acehnese communities attends to both the visible, recognizable forms of trauma resulting from the conflict and the tsunami, as well as the invisible, "everyday" experiences of distress, crisis, and "feeling bad"<sup>281</sup> and attempts to understand the linkages between these diverse experiences and accounts of trauma.

In expanding my definition of "trauma" to include events occurring in both "visible" and "invisible" forms and at both the collective and the individual level, I am also attuned to the politics of naming events as "traumatic." For Claire Moon, the act of designating an event as "traumatic" can at once legitimize certain experiences as worthy of attention, funding, and therapy, while simultaneously delegitimizing other events, obscuring them from the public eye. Moon writes, "The discourse of therapy provides a radically new mode of state legitimation. It is the language through which new state institutions, primarily truth commissions, attempt to acknowledge suffering, ameliorate trauma and simultaneously found political legitimacy."<sup>282</sup> Examining the political purchase of the term "trauma" is particularly significant for understanding the conflict and the tsunami in Aceh. While the tsunami drew worldwide attention and significant amounts of aid, the separatist conflict has been and continues to be silenced by the Indonesian government, thus limiting available resources for trauma recovery.

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<sup>280</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 3.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Claire Moon, "Healing Past Violence: Traumatic Assumptions and Therapeutic Interventions in War and Reconciliation," *Journal of Human Rights* 8:1 (January 2009): 72.

As with conceptualizations of “trauma,” notions of “healing” and “recovery” also deserve further elaboration. Many trauma theorists have criticized notions of “healing” that emphasize cure and recovery, which may suggest that trauma can be easily, or eventually, overcome. Framing trauma in this way can also imply that trauma survivors are responsible for their distress, and fails to link feelings of emotional crisis with systemic oppression or injustice. Claire Moon also notes that an emphasis on therapy tends to portray trauma survivors as “sick” individuals or victims. Moon writes, “The therapeutic ethos pathologizes human behavior and actions, representing them as if they were diseases needing proper diagnosis and treatment. A pathological approach to human behavior concentrates on causal factors, symptoms and the development of a condition, and upon the necessary professional interventions required to ameliorate disease.”<sup>283</sup>

The pathologizing approach to therapy is typically associated with psychotherapeutic and medical healing efforts used in North America and Western Europe, efforts that are not always appropriate or welcome in other countries and cultures. For example, observing contemporary healing methods in Aceh, researchers and foreign aid workers have commented upon an existing binary between “traditional” healing practices, which often involves a spiritual healer, and “modern” healing practices, in which Western psychotherapy and clinical treatment are used. When interviewed about their preference for treatment, many Acehnese were reluctant to disclose their use of traditional healing, believing that this form of treatment represented “‘backward’ village ways.”<sup>284</sup> However, clients have also expressed frustration with “modern” treatment, which has tended to over-diagnose cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and

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<sup>283</sup> Moon, “Healing Past Violence,” 83.

<sup>284</sup> International Organization for Migration, “Psychosocial Needs Assessment of Communities Affected by the Conflict in the Districts of Pidie, Bireuen and Aceh Utara” (Banda Aceh, Indonesia 2006), 48.

failed to offer a spiritual healing component.<sup>285</sup> Shaharom also observes, “Western-style debriefing (a group therapy technique intended to get victims to express their feelings about a horrific event and to relive it as vividly as they can) and psychological aid would not fit easily into the psycho-social matrix of non-Western disaster victims who were recipients of aid.”<sup>286</sup> Rather than investigating a strictly scientific or medical definition of “healing,” I follow Hsu et. al. in understanding healing as a “multidimensional” and “dynamic process of recovering from a trauma or illness by working toward realistic goals, restoring function, and regaining a personal sense of balance and peace.”<sup>287</sup> As a result, my analysis of what constitutes “effective” healing methods does not necessarily rely upon facts, figures, and other forms of “cold” data. Instead, my understanding of healing privileges individual perceptions of “balance,” “peace,” and normalcy.

In addition to critiquing the ways in which Western notions of therapy and healing have been privileged over local understandings of and approaches to trauma recovery, theorists have increasingly called into question the significance of talking or narrating traumatic experience as a healing method. Skeptical of the benefits of the “talking cure,” Peggy Phelan notes, “Psychoanalysis suggests that the body’s ‘truth’ does not organize itself narratively or chronologically. The body does not experience the world the same way consciousness does.”<sup>288</sup> As a result, Phelan claims that other methods for communicating traumatic experience—methods that do not demand a coherent, linear narrative—must be explored. Ann Cvetkovich also finds that trauma, as an “unspeakable and unrepresentable” experience, requires alternative methods

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<sup>285</sup> Greg Miller, “The Tsunami’s Psychological Aftermath,” *Science* 309: 5737 (August 2005): 1031.

<sup>286</sup> Mohamed Hatta Shaharom, *Tsunami... Grief Beyond Tears: Notes on a Humanitarian Journey in Aceh, Indonesia and North Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2006), 63.

<sup>287</sup> Clarissa Hsu et al, “Healing in Primary Care: A Vision Shared by Patients, Physicians, Nurses and Clinical Staff,” *Annals of Family Medicine* 6 (2008): 307.

<sup>288</sup> Phelan, “Dance and the History of Hysteria,” 91.

for expression and healing. Cvetkovich writes, “trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. It thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma’s ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral.”<sup>289</sup>

Because performance is a lived, physical experience that draws together a community of listeners, some theorists have suggested that performance may be particularly appropriate for traumatic expression. For example, Diana Taylor writes, “traumatic memory often relies on live, interactive performance for transmission. Even studies that emphasize the link between trauma and narrative make evident in the analysis itself that the transmission of traumatic memory from victim to witness involves the shared and participatory act of telling and listening associated with live performance. Bearing witness is a live process, a doing, an event that takes place in real time, in the presence of a listener who ‘comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event.’”<sup>290</sup> To be able to express feelings of pain or trauma through performance thus constitutes for Taylor a means of owning experience, a tactic that is particularly important for the survival of individuals and communities. Similarly, Joe Roach has found that “kinesthetic imagination,” a term that describes “the transmission (and transformation) of memory through movement,” is critical for the productive reinvention or revision of presumably “unspeakable” memories.<sup>291</sup>

At the same time that trauma theorists are exploring the possibilities performance may offer for trauma-affected individuals and communities, expressive arts therapists (i.e., practitioners who use music, dance, drama, and art to heal a variety of afflictions and illnesses)

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<sup>289</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 7.

<sup>290</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 167.

<sup>291</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 26-27.



have already put many of these theories into action. For Irma Dosamantes-Beaudry, art-making is a creative process that can promote self and communal transformation; it is thus beneficial for individuals and groups who have experienced catastrophes, trauma or other events that disrupt one's sense of equilibrium.<sup>292</sup> Performance practices are also important for strengthening feelings of community and building support networks. While Turino and Lea explain that participatory physical performances, such as dance, marching, singing and chanting, offer "a special kind of physical bond with others" and promote "a concrete sense of identity more than all other art forms,"<sup>293</sup> Patricia Capello suggests that traditional dance is particularly suited to these purposes, as "familiar dances," such as folk or social dances, can be "a source of collective memory, tying together generations and giving meaning to the movement."<sup>294</sup> For the 3,000 Sri Lankan tsunami survivors who participated in a traditional dance festival following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that also devastated the coast of Aceh, participants found that the festival offered a space to talk to others who had shared their experience. This created a sense of solidarity while also distracting participants from their immediate distress.<sup>295</sup>

In thinking about the ways in which Acehnese attempt to address feelings of trauma as well as the role of performance in trauma recovery, I would like to propose two additional terms that I find useful. First, although my understanding of "healing" aims to center individual perceptions and experiences, this term still implies, for me, a sense of finality and resolution, as if once the "healing" occurs, the trauma disappears. Moreover, both "healing" and "recovery," as Claire Moon pointed out, run the risk of pathologizing trauma survivors, suggesting that there

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<sup>292</sup> Irma Dosamantes-Beaudry, *The Arts in Contemporary Healing* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 5.

<sup>293</sup> Thomas Turino and James Lea, eds., *Identity and the Arts in Diasporic Communities* (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2004), 18.

<sup>294</sup> Patricia Capello, "Dance as Our Source in Dance/Movement Therapy Education and Practice," *American Journal of Dance Therapy* 29:1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 38.

<sup>295</sup> Gina Wilkinson, "Sunshine Festival for 3,000 Children in Sri Lanka," *International Organization for Migration* (August 1, 2005), [http://www.iom.int/tsunami/stories/sr\\_ns\\_01\\_08\\_05.htm](http://www.iom.int/tsunami/stories/sr_ns_01_08_05.htm) (accessed April 25, 2012).

is something “wrong” with them and that getting “better” is their responsibility. In place of “healing” and “recovery,” then, I would like to offer the notion of *resisting* trauma. I use this term not to suggest that trauma can ever be avoided, for I do not believe we can control whether or not and how trauma affects us. However, I do believe that the debilitating effects of trauma—effects that interfere with experiences of joy, peace, or calm and can come to dominate our existence—can be fought against, contended with, opposed. This struggle may be never-ending; sometimes we will be successful, other times not. Regardless of the outcome, conceiving of our attempts to deal with trauma as a type of resistance grants trauma survivors a degree of agency, for resistance is a choice.

The second term I find useful for this discussion is Michel De Certeau’s notion of a “tactic.” For De Certeau, “A *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus...It does not have the means to *keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’...it operates in isolated actions, blow by blow...It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak.”<sup>296</sup> For the purposes of my research, a tactic might be any method, tool, or technique individuals use to resist the debilitating effects of trauma. My research thus aims to understand how traditional performance can be a “tactic,” or a tool of resistance, for Acehese trauma survivors.

However, my discussion of the significance of traditional dance, music, and theater practices for Acehese trauma survivors is also concerned with how experiences of trauma and approaches to trauma recovery are shaped by gender identity. As discussed in Chapter 2, social attitudes in Aceh are not always supportive of Acehese women’s performance activities, and

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<sup>296</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 37.

opportunities for Acehese women to pursue performance have been limited. Acehese men and women also experienced the conflict and the tsunami in different ways, which means that healing methods should attend to these differences. In the following section, I investigate how the conflict and the tsunami produced different experiences of trauma for Acehese men and women.

### **Gendered Traumas**

As a result of the separatist conflict in Aceh, over 15,000 individuals were killed and thousands more were disappeared or tortured by the military and the police.<sup>297</sup> Even when individuals did not experience this kind of brutality first-hand, Acehese were undoubtedly affected by threats of violence and other forms of intimidation from both GAM soldiers and the Indonesian army (TNI). Leslie McCulloch explains, “The effect of the war has been that everyone in Aceh has been suspected by the Indonesian military (TNI) and police as a potential member of GAM, and therefore a legitimate target.”<sup>298</sup> Although the conflict took place primarily within Aceh’s northeastern territories (including Pidie, Birueun, and Aceh Utara), Acehese living outside of these designated “conflict zones” were also affected by the presence of military troops. One Acehese student who was originally from Langsa (Aceh Timur) explained that she frequently heard gunshots and bombs, which prevented her from walking to school.<sup>299</sup> Another Acehese student from Lokna (Aceh Besar) remembered being stopped by soldiers and quizzed on the Indonesian constitution, the *Pancasila*. When his friends answered incorrectly, they were severely beaten.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Lesley McCulloch, *Aceh: Then and Now* (London, UK: Minority Rights Group International, 2005), 3.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>299</sup> Winny, interview with author, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010.

<sup>300</sup> Edy, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 5, 2010.

Women and men did not experience the conflict in the same way. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, women were subjected to sexual violence and other forms of harassment that men were less likely to experience. Moreover, women were less vocal about their problems because the more women knew about the conflict, the more likely they were to be tortured.<sup>301</sup> For McCulloch, “in Aceh’s predominately Islamic society, rape or the threat of rape or sexual assault carries a stigma that is felt by the woman and her family for years to come. Incidents of rape or sexual assault have often gone unreported in Aceh, first, because of the stigma attached and, second, because of the fear of reprisals.”<sup>302</sup> Women were also less likely to report crimes they had witnessed since witnesses were not offered any form of protection until 2005. The United Nations Population Fund reports, “without protection, survivors and witnesses of violence perpetrated by armed groups remained silent. It is likely that this culture of silence and fear accounts for the low numbers of reported incidents of gender-based violence.”<sup>303</sup>

Nevertheless, reports conducted by humanitarian and political organizations have suggested that violence against women was particularly intense between 1989-1998, a period in which Aceh was designated a *Daerah Operasi Militer* (Military Operation Zone). During this time, both Acehnese and Indonesian soldiers committed human rights abuses and financially exploited civilians. The Indonesian army also set up military checkpoints and imposed curfews to restrict civilians’ mobility. Reporting on the violence during this time, the Aceh team of the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) found that 120 women were raped, 3,000 women had been widowed and 20,000 children had lost their fathers due to the conflict between

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<sup>301</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 20, 2010.

<sup>302</sup> McCulloch, *Aceh: Then and Now*, 20-21.

<sup>303</sup> United Nations Population Fund, “Gender-Based Violence in Indonesia: A Case Study,” October 2005, 9.

1989 and 1998.<sup>304</sup> However, violence against women continued beyond this period as well. According to McCulloch, “after martial law in 2003, the targeting of the wives, daughters and sisters of members of GAM soldiers became widespread... There have also been many reports of women and children being used as human shields by the military when under attack by GAM.”<sup>305</sup>

In order to understand the extent to which Acehnese suffer from trauma, various organizations collected data concerning the emotional and psychic health of Acehnese civilians after the conflict. In 2004, the local Department of Health produced the following information: “51 percent of the population of Aceh suffers psychological and physical ‘disability’ due to the conflict. Depression accounts for 25.7 percent of this, and 18.4 percent is due to trauma and panic... A majority of psychological trauma is suffered by women.”<sup>306</sup> The authors of “Psychosocial Needs Assessment of Communities Affected by the Conflict” also suggest that trauma resulting from the conflict can be described as “‘complex trauma’—many years of repeated experiences of violence and insecurity, not a single episode of trauma and a return to a situation of safety and security.”<sup>307</sup> These authors also found, “higher numbers of reported experiences of conflict-related events increase the likelihood that persons will suffer both mild and the most severe symptoms of depression and PTSD. Second, all groups in Bireuen and Aceh Utara have far greater odds of suffering these symptoms than in Pidie. Women have slightly greater odds than men.”<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> McCulloch, *Aceh: Then and Now*, 20.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>307</sup> International Organization for Migration, “Psychosocial Needs Assessment,” 3-4.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami further contributed to the “complex trauma” that many Acehese experienced. Named the “biggest single natural disaster in living memory,”<sup>309</sup> the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami left 170,000 Acehese dead or missing, destroyed or partially destroyed 100,000 houses, and severely damaged over 800 km of coastline.<sup>310</sup> Because most of the affected areas were home to fishing communities, the tsunami also destroyed 78% of livelihoods.<sup>311</sup> In addition to these immediate losses, Acehese continued to suffer from the effects of the disaster months and even years after the tsunami struck. Housed in temporary “barracks,” over 140,000 Acehese were forced to live in cramped facilities, living off of the government’s monthly allocation of \$9/month with no activities to improve their emotional health. For Lukman Age, “living in barracks with strangers will present a major challenge to many rural Acehese. Barracks do not offer privacy and are likely to result in stress, arguments and increased risk of sexual harassment.”<sup>312</sup>

As with the conflict, Acehese women were affected by the tsunami and its aftermath in specific ways. Four times as many women than men died from the tsunami and those who survived were at risk of being sexually harassed or abused within the temporary living shelters.<sup>313</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Acehese women also had little opportunity to express their grievances and play an active role in reconstruction processes. According to an Eye on Aceh and Aid Watch evaluation, “for the most part, it appears that women, the poor, the landless

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<sup>309</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, “Tsunami Five-Year Progress Report, 2004-2009” (Geneva, Switzerland: IFRC, 2009), 2.

<sup>310</sup> Aris Ananta and Lee Poh Onn, eds. *Aceh: A New Dawn* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 68.

<sup>311</sup> Kirsten Schulze, “Between Conflict and Peace: Tsunami Aid and Reconstruction in Aceh,” *London School of Economics Publications* (November 2005), <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Publications/HumanSecurityReport/Tsunami/Aceh%20Tsunami%20Response.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2012), 2.

<sup>312</sup> Lukman Age, “IDPs Confined to Barracks in Aceh,” *Forced Migration Review*, 2005: 22-23.

<sup>313</sup> Rhona MacDonald, “How Women were Affected by the Tsunami,” *PLoS Medicine* 2:6 (June 2005): 0474-0475.

and other marginalised groups have been sidelined in the decision-making processes accompanying the reconstruction effort... In many tsunami-affected areas, not only are the majority of survivors men, but the majority of early returnees to villages where camps have been set up are also men; the women live further away in barracks, or with family and friends. Since the community meetings are often adhoc, the women simply ‘miss out’ on the opportunity to participate.”<sup>314</sup> In addition to their exclusion from community forums, many women who survived were left as the sole providers and caregivers for their families.<sup>315</sup> In this way, the tsunami may have reinforced existing assumptions about women’s connection to the domestic sphere.

Reports on tsunami-related trauma reflect this gendered discrepancy. For example, the Indonesian Ministry of Health estimated in 2006 that 400,000 Acehnese could be suffering from trauma-related stress disorders, and that the majority of these Acehnese are women.<sup>316</sup> The World Health Organization also reported, “up to half of the 5 million people affected by the tsunami would experience moderate to severe psychological distress that would fade without intervention over the course of a year or more. Roughly 5% to 10% would develop more persistent problems, such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other anxiety disorders that would be unlikely to resolve themselves without intervention.”<sup>317</sup>

The ways in which trauma was treated in Aceh also reflects the concerns of trauma theorists illustrated in the previous section. For example, Miller suggests that Western medical approaches were privileged when diagnosing and treating Acehnese, while local understandings of and methods of “healing” were ignored. Miller writes, “in terms of psychological services,

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<sup>314</sup> Eye on Aceh and Aid Watch, “A People’s Agenda? Post-Tsunami Aid in Aceh,” February 2006, 13.

<sup>315</sup> Ananta and Onn, *Aceh: A New Dawn*, 53.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>317</sup> Miller, “The Tsunami’s Psychological Aftermath,” 1032.

one of the biggest problems...has been an overemphasis on finding and treating cases of PTSD, which is characterized by flashbacks, emotional detachment, sleep difficulties, and other disruptions...People want help rebuilding their homes, reestablishing their livelihoods, and getting the children back to school. They don't want foreigners coming over and saying, 'You've suffered a deep wound in your psyche, and you're going to need our help getting over it.'"<sup>318</sup>

Treatment of trauma in Aceh was also shaped by political decisions about the kinds of experiences that deserved aid and assistance. In response to the tsunami, for example, 240 NGOs had registered with Indonesian authorities in Aceh just days after the disaster struck.<sup>319</sup> In addition, the UN Secretary-General requested US \$371 million for immediate relief in tsunami-affected regions in Indonesia, and by January 5, 2005, Australia pledged \$1 billion for a newly formed Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development.<sup>320</sup> This immediate international response has been referred to as "the largest emergency relief response in history."<sup>321</sup> In contrast, the conflict has received minimal attention from international players. This is partially related to the fact that Aceh was closed off to foreigners during intense periods of violence and information about the conflict was largely inaccessible under Suharto's rule. Even after international humanitarian relief workers were allowed inside the province and given an opportunity to assess the situation, however, tsunami aid remained a priority and many assistance efforts "lack[ed] a conflict-sensitive perspective."<sup>322</sup> The organization Eye on Aceh reported, "unequal levels of assistance, whether within or between communities or regions, and

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 1033-34.

<sup>319</sup> Shaharom, *Tsunami...Grief Beyond Tears*, 58.

<sup>320</sup> McCulloch, *Aceh: Then and Now*, 31.

<sup>321</sup> "Five Years After Indian Ocean Tsunami, Affected Nations Rebuilding Better," *UN News Center* (December 29, 2009), <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=33365> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>322</sup> Eye on Aceh, "A People's Agenda?" 5.



the ability of some individuals to profit from the presence of international agencies while others bear the brunt of inflation, are already fuelling social jealousy. Meanwhile, the potential for tension between those displaced by the tsunami and the communities into which many have settled will only grow as more people migrate from ‘non-tsunami-affected’ regions into ‘tsunami-affected’ ones in search of employment and assistance....<sup>323</sup>

By designating as “trauma” the tsunami’s effects upon Acehese individuals and communities, the Indonesian government was able to secure large amounts of aid and to promote itself as a concerned nation-state despite the fact that, as many observers have noted, tsunami relief funds have been severely mismanaged by the Jakarta government as a result of corruption and greed.<sup>324</sup> The construction of a Tsunami Museum in 2008—a project that cost between \$5.6 and \$7.5 million—further emphasizes the extent to which tsunami-related trauma has been acknowledged and legitimized by the Indonesian government, while the separatist conflict and its ongoing emotional impact continues to be silenced and ignored. To this day, plans for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which were stipulated in the Law on the Governance of Aceh (Law. No. 11/2006), still have not materialized, nor has there been any discussion about a conflict museum. In this way, the term “trauma” has played a significant role in the lives of Acehese within the past three decades. Though the term may be appropriate for describing Acehese experience, it has also influenced how these events are understood by international observers, how they are constructed within Acehese social consciousness, and what kinds of resources are available to Acehese for trauma recovery.

### **The Conflict, the Tsunami and the Arts**

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> McCulloch, *Aceh: Then and Now*, 31.

The conflict and the tsunami interrupted the lives of Acehnese in many different ways. Not only did these events result in the loss of family members and loved ones, they also destroyed homes and jobs, destabilized Aceh's economy, and heightened feelings of fear, anxiety, hopelessness and doubt. For Ari Jauhari, "those phenomena, wars and disasters, were deeply traumatic for everyone who directly or indirectly experienced it and have affected every aspect of Acehnese life."<sup>325</sup> As with so many other features of life in Aceh, the performing arts were also influenced by these tragic events.

Within the dangerous environment produced by the conflict, for example, Acehnese were less willing to hold dance rehearsals or attend theater performances, as these arts activities generally took place at night. Many Acehnese were afraid to leave their homes, and those who dared to venture out risked punishment from soldiers. Margaret Kartomi explains, "traditionally, artistic performances at life-event ceremonies lasted a week or more, but these were abandoned. Young people in particular had few opportunities to learn and perform traditional and popular music and dances, and the standards of artistry declined through lack of teaching time and performance opportunities. In most areas, the old Acehnese habit of holding frequent artistic competitions between villages ceased. Moreover, during the conflict most performing groups were starved of funds, and were unable to function."<sup>326</sup>

The tsunami that struck Aceh's northwestern provinces (Aceh Besar, Aceh Jaya, and Aceh Barat) also interrupted the development of Aceh's performing arts by destroying musical instruments, washing away rehearsal spaces, and taking the lives of Acehnese artists. For example, the performing arts facilities at the University of Syiah Kuala were among the most

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<sup>325</sup> Ari Jauhari, "Music in Acehnese Wedding Ceremonies," *Pasai Post* (June 8, 2008), <http://www.cosmoscopia.de/pasaipost/?cat=12> (accessed April 25, 2012), 1-2.

<sup>326</sup> Margaret Kartomi, "Surviving Conflict," *Inside Indonesia* (April-June 2009), <http://www.insideindonesia.org/edition-97/surviving-conflict> (accessed April 25, 2012).

damaged buildings.<sup>327</sup> Though the facilities were already limited with many resources outdated or unusable, “the tsunami came and destroyed all those facilities and left very few things that worked for instructional purposes.”<sup>328</sup> For younger generations of Acehnese whose exposure to the arts had been restricted by the fighting, the tsunami further diminished their opportunities to interact with their performance traditions. As a result, many Acehnese growing up during this period were unfamiliar with their own cultural practices.

In many ways, the signing of the Helsinki peace agreement, which brought an end to the evening curfews and military check-points, and the tsunami reconstruction efforts, which began as early as March 2005, allowed Acehnese to redevelop gradually their relationship with the performing arts. Kartomi explains, “performance standards improved perceptibly as regular rehearsals were held once more and artists could focus on perfecting their craft. Performing arts teachers opened or re-opened their music and dance schools and troupes (*sanggar*) or taught the religious arts in the Islamic schools (*madrasah*) again.”<sup>329</sup> The arts were also revived through the efforts of international NGOs, local NGOs, and Acehnese artists, who sought to incorporate performance into trauma-healing activities.

Nevertheless, the development of the performing arts continued to be impeded by other political changes, namely, the implementation of *syariah* law. According to Debra Yatim, an Acehnese woman’s rights activist, poet, and arts enthusiast, the desire to develop an official arts institute in Aceh (similar to IKJ, the Institute of the Arts in Jakarta) has existed in Aceh since at least 2006; however, efforts to transform this desire into a reality have not been successful.

Debra Yatim explains, “Professor Sudarno W. Kusumo, the former director of IKJ, he put his

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<sup>327</sup> Ari Jauhari, “Shining the Talent of Acehnese Artist: Discourse about Higher Education of the Arts for Aceh,” *Pasai Post* (June 8, 2008), <http://www.cosmoscopia.de/pasaipost/?m=200806> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Kartomi, “Surviving Conflict.”

finger on the problem. He said, ‘As long as *syariah* in Aceh continues to forbid women from performing on stage, our arts will go nowhere.’<sup>330</sup> Though Sudarno Kusumo’s statement was a bit of an exaggeration—Acehnese women can currently be seen performing on stage in many festivals and other events in Aceh—his observation suggests that Acehnese arts cannot develop within a society that is obsessed with adhering to the conservative dictates of *syariah* law—that is, a law that emphasizes women’s domestic responsibilities and intensifies the policing of women’s bodies in public spaces. Kusumo’s comment thus mirrors my own concerns that Acehnese girls and women have far fewer opportunities to develop and pursue an interest in the performing arts compared to Acehnese boys and men.

As I have shown, the conflict, the tsunami, and the aftermath of these events have clearly influenced the political, social, economic, and emotional lives of Acehnese men and women in different ways. As I will argue in this chapter, these recent events in Acehnese history have also influenced how Acehnese men and women interact with their performing arts practices. Though the conflict prevented both Acehnese men and women from gathering together at cultural events or arts rehearsals, women’s mobility and vocality—that is, their willingness to come forward with their concerns and personal stories—was more severely restricted. The tsunami and the more stringent implementation of *syariah* law also reinforced the notion that women’s responsibilities are tied to their family and domestic life. As a result, even after the peace agreement was signed and performance activities had “returned to normal,” Acehnese women may have felt that they had no business engaging in public performances, or that doing so would be deemed inappropriate by their communities. Moreover, Acehnese girls had fewer role models who could inspire them to participate in Acehnese performance. Kartomi observes, “of the

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<sup>330</sup> Debra Yatim, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 12, 2010.

thousands of artists who died in the tsunami, an estimated 25-35 percent were aged 10 to 15 years, and more than half were women.”<sup>331</sup> Reinforcing societal expectations that Acehnese girls and women should prioritize their domestic responsibilities and keep silent about their emotional concerns, and depriving Acehnese girls and women of female role models who might have encouraged them to interact with Aceh’s performing arts, the conflict and the tsunami have engendered a set of conditions that make Acehnese girls and women less likely to engage in performance practices. As I will explore in greater detail, these kinds of limitations will ultimately influence whether or not and how Acehnese individuals use their performing arts to address feelings of trauma.

### **PERFORMANCE AND TRAUMA RECOVERY**

In response to the conflict and the tsunami, international and local organizations as well as individual Acehnese performers used Aceh’s performance arts as a method of trauma recovery for conflict- and tsunami-affected individuals. The use of performance for “therapeutic” or “healing” purposes is not new in Indonesia; while Indonesian performance genres have been used for centuries to inspire laughter and to alleviate feelings of distress stemming from events such as political warfare or natural disasters, the 1980s and 1990s saw a more concentrated effort to use performance, particularly *teater rakyat* (“people’s theater”), which served “as a medium for community development and social empowerment.”<sup>332</sup> However, performance is certainly not as well-known or as popular as medical treatments, and for many Indonesians, the term “*terapi tari*” (dance therapy) or “*terapi teater*” (drama therapy) produces blank stares. Why, then, did these organizations and individuals decide to use performance as a form of trauma recovery? In what ways did they believe that performance could be a healing tool?

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<sup>331</sup> Kartomi, “Surviving Conflict.”

<sup>332</sup> Barbara Hatley, “Social Reconciliation and Community Integration Through Theater,” in *Reconciling Indonesia: Grassroots Agency for Peace*, ed. Birgit Bräuchler (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 80.

The following section offers a closer look at performance-based healing practices that were employed in Aceh for conflict and tsunami survivors. In comparing the efforts of international NGOs, local NGOs, and individual performers, my discussion aims to illuminate how these organizations and individuals incorporated performance into their trauma recovery practices, their reasons for relying on performance as a potential healing tool, and my own analysis of the benefits and limitations of their efforts. I am also concerned with the ways in which gender identity shapes Acehnese individuals' relationship to the performing arts, particularly their relationship to performance as a "tactic" for resisting trauma.

### **International Organizations**

Though the conflict in Aceh began in 1976, international assistance was largely unavailable until the early 1990s due, in large part, to the Suharto era policy of silence and suppression in regards to political violence. In contrast, just weeks after the tsunami struck, organizations began to arrive in Aceh, delayed only by the destruction of communication lines in Aceh, which prevented information about the extent of the tsunami's damage from emerging.<sup>333</sup> By May 2005, there were over 350 international NGOs registered with the United Nations.<sup>334</sup> Initially, these organizations focused on immediate needs, such as building temporary shelters, supplying food and water, and addressing health and sanitation needs. However, in 2005 a few INGOs began to address the emotional and psychological devastation brought on by the conflict and the tsunami by providing counseling and in some cases, prescribing medication for post-traumatic stress syndrome, or PTSD. They also created programs that taught participants vocational skills so that they could become self-sufficient after the organizations left. The

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<sup>333</sup> Schulze, "Between Conflict and Peace."

<sup>334</sup> Rodd McGibbon, "Local Leadership and the Aceh Conflict," in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 348.

programs I address in this section are those that sought to use of performance (music, dance, or theater practices) for addressing feelings of trauma.

***Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team for Ladies***

AMURTEL (Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team for Ladies) is an international NGO that was developed in 1975 to address the specific problems that women and children face following natural disasters. In response to the tsunami in Aceh, AMURTEL spent three years (2005-2008) implementing over twenty-five projects. These projects addressed not only the health and educational needs of Acehnese women and children, but also involved teaching women specific skills that would enable them to become economically self-sufficient. For example, as part of AMURTEL's Sewing Livelihood Project, 130 women in six different barracks were given a sewing machine and taught how to sew school uniforms. In addition to earning a small sum of money, the women reported that they benefited psychologically from having meaningful work activity and feeling as though they belonged to a work collective.<sup>335</sup> AMURTEL also developed a cake-making program, providing equipment and ingredients to forty women in two barracks. The program was initiated during Ramadan, when the demand for cakes was high. The women made a small profit selling the cakes, but also had to repay a portion of the start-up capital in five monthly installments. The cakes were distributed to orphans, the disabled, and the elderly for free.

In addition to reconstructing schools and teaching women sewing and cake-making skills, AMURTEL also provided traditional dance lessons to children survivors. The AMURTEL staff hired local dance instructors who worked closely with the children and determined which dances the children would learn. Many instructors taught a traditional welcoming dance, which was

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<sup>335</sup> AMURTEL, <http://www.id.amurt.net/amurtel/welcome.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).

used to honor visitors, including NGO staff working in Aceh. The dance programs were developed in conjunction with other international NGOs, and in some cases, involved competitions with dance troupes from other villages. According to Kalyani, an AMURTEL staff member, this opportunity to be competitive was important for the participants, as it encouraged them to “push themselves to excel and to win,” and provided a positive, lively activity to engage in that helped to minimize feelings of trauma.<sup>336</sup> Kalyani explained, “the traditional dance provided the dancers with a form of recreation that allowed them to enjoy themselves, forget their sadness and loss, reaffirm their culture and thus themselves. All in all, I believe it helped them to recover from the trauma of their loss.”<sup>337</sup> The dance activities were carried out as part of a short-term program, and in March 2008, AMURTEL officially left Aceh.

### ***International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies***

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) societies from over 100 countries contributed to Aceh’s recovery from the 2004 tsunami. In addition to rebuilding houses and schools, restoring livelihoods, and providing clean water and sanitation facilities, IFRC also developed several psychological support programs (PSPs) that helped communities recover emotionally and psychologically from the tsunami. Some of these programs involved tree planting and informal schooling, while others used performance activities to lift survivors’ spirits. For example, in working with the American Red Cross, the Indonesian Red Cross developed a “PM Idol” (PMI) program in 2005. The program was loosely based on the TV show, “American Idol,” and provided a lively competition for children survivors of the tsunami. According to the program organizers, “giving children a chance to express themselves through song or poetry allows them to draw on inner strengths that every child has, and is a

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<sup>336</sup> Kalyani, email message to author, June 29, 2008.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.



crucial step toward normalcy.”<sup>338</sup> In addition to performing in front of their peers within relief camps, the contestants also had an opportunity to perform in a radio talk show on Friday nights, hosted by PMI counselors. “The top three winners for each category - singing for boys, singing for girls, and poetry reading - are recorded and replayed across the province.”<sup>339</sup> Throughout the month of December 2005, Red Cross workers conducted two local contests per week, finding finalists to perform in the final round on December 23. Many of the songs and poems were about the tsunami, suggesting that the children were “eager to make sense of a disaster that stunned most of the world.”<sup>340</sup> IFRC also held an appreciation ceremony for community members and “facilitators”—Acehnese who had lost their family and homes but volunteered with IFRC to provide support to survivors. The ceremony was held in Banda Aceh on May 17, 2008 and included traditional songs and dances. The ceremony marked the end of the IFRC PSP programs, but served to encourage facilitators to continue these programs in their own capacities.<sup>341</sup>

### ***United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization***

In February 2005 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization (UNESCO) began to investigate the ways in which socio-cultural life was affected by the tsunami in Aceh. This involved assessing the damage done to Aceh’s cultural facilities as well as to Aceh’s community of artists.<sup>342</sup> They also evaluated the degree to which Acehnese communities were affected by trauma, and how these communities adopted a “cultural approach”

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<sup>338</sup> Scott Baldauf, “In Tsunami Relief Camps, Kids Sing Their Hearts Out,” *Christian Science Monitor* (December 9, 2005), <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1209/p01s04-woap.html> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Wilda Anggraeni, “Banda Aceh’s Unsung Heroes,” *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies* (September 4, 2008), <http://www.ifrc.org/docs/news/08/08090402/index.asp> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>342</sup> This is likely to be a low estimate since many Acehnese artists do not self-identify as artists, but instead identify themselves according to other professions in which they take part.

towards alleviating feelings of distress, whether this involved singing, dancing, partaking in spiritual activities, drawing, reading poetry, or watching movies.

Between April and June 2005, UNESCO collaborated with the Sacred Bridge Foundation, a Jakarta-based NGO that aims to spread awareness about indigenous arts and crafts within Indonesia. Together, these organizations created a performance-healing program called “Rising Above the Tsunami: A Transmission of Acehese Cultural Heritage.” From April to June, the two organizations located and trained seven local artists, who worked with approximately 120 children, ages 4-19, from two different barracks, teaching them music and dance in ways that incorporated a psychotherapeutic approach.<sup>343</sup> For example, the artists were trained to “emphasize the use of different senses (such as listening, feeling, and seeing), reflection and expression through traditional songs and dances.”<sup>344</sup> Working with the *seudati* dance and forms of oral story-telling, the artists encouraged children to discuss their memories and experiences. The program organizers believed that “the interaction between the story teller and the children would not only strengthen their cultural identity and solidarity, it also generated a positive and supportive dynamic among each other through their musical dialog.”<sup>345</sup> At the end of the program, which was designated RAT I (Rising Above the Tsunami, Part I), the children participated in “musical clinics” and final performances.<sup>346</sup>

Because these programs were deemed successful in restoring pride in Acehese traditional culture in ways that promoted trauma recovery, UNESCO expanded the programs to

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<sup>343</sup> Iwan Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere: Dynamic of the Tradition Vocal Performance in the Islamic Region of Aceh from the Late 19<sup>th</sup> to the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (PhD diss. Monash University School of Music, Melbourne, 2006), 249.

<sup>344</sup> UNESCO, “Cultural and Psychotherapeutic Healing Action for the Surviving Children in Aceh” (June 8, 2005), <http://www.unesco.or.id/activities/culture/completed/249.php> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> UNESCO, “Press Release—Rising Above the Tsunami: A Transmission of Acehese Cultural Heritage” (May 12, 2006), <http://www.unesco.or.id/activities/culture/completed/286.php> (accessed April 25, 2012).

four additional camps, conducting similar activities from December 2005 to March 2006. This constituted the second phase of the project, called RAT II, and involved well-known Acehese performers, including Syeh Lah Bangguna and Syeh Lah Genta teaching *seudati*, Ismail Sarong teaching *rapa'i*, and Marzuki Hasan, who taught *saman* and other folk dances. As a culmination for RAT II, UNESCO organized a final performance, held in Jakarta on May 9, 2006. The program involved flying 48 children and artists to Jakarta for one week. According to the May 12, 2006 Press Release, this final performance served “to showcase the importance of culture in the rehabilitation efforts in a post-disaster situation...It will allow the opportunity for all stakeholders to attend: Government Officials, Diplomatic Corps, UN Agencies, I/NGO, media, future sponsors, students, and any other interested publics.”<sup>347</sup>

In a subsequent report, Mr. Arief Rachman, the Executive Chairman of the Indonesian National Commission for UNESCO, Ms. Linda Posadas, the UNESCO Jakarta Office representative, and other UNESCO staff applauded the performance as a key component in the children’s healing process. They commented that the performance demonstrated “how artists and children became engaged in a cultural and psychotherapeutic healing process, with artists sensing and responding to children’s emotional needs, using the vehicle of Acehese traditional songs and dances to help children deal with their fear and emotions and instill a sense of belonging to a greater whole. The event showcased the role of culture in the rehabilitation effort which was the objective of this event.”<sup>348</sup> Himalchuli Gurung, UNESCO’s Program Specialist for Culture also remarked, “what we discovered is that people are more forthcoming, are more proactive, they are engaging themselves, they are participating, more open, and this is already a

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> UNESCO, “Three Generations of Acehese Present a Special Cultural Performance Entitled Rising Above the Tsunami: A Transmission of Acehese Cultural Heritage in Jakarta, Indonesia” (May 17, 2006), <http://www.unesco.or.id/activities/culture/completed/287.php> (accessed April 25, 2012).

sign of the confidence rebuilding, you know, they're not laid down, they're not thinking about the disaster that passed, they're not helplessly just sitting and lying there, but they want to move on. They're more forward-looking, which is a very positive sign."<sup>349</sup> The program was completed in June 2006.

### ***International Rescue Committee***

Another approach INGOs took towards incorporating the performing arts into healing and rehabilitation efforts was through rebuilding performance facilities and replacing performance materials. Working with the Tambora Dance Troupe in Meulaboh, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) helped to fund the construction of a two-story rehearsal hall, as well as materials for costumes, instruments, and make-up for performers. IRC also assisted with organizing and distributing information about public performances. Martin Canter, the IRC's education and youth development advisor, explains, "we plan to help the youth group's own radio station organize live discussions on issues that are important to the young people of Meulaboh."<sup>350</sup> IRC felt that the reconstruction of performance facilities was significant for the rehabilitation of Acehese society. One of the members of the Tambora Dance Troupe explains, "when we perform it also allows our parents to see the potential and the spirit of Aceh's young people... This is our way to rebuild Aceh. We are very proud of this."<sup>351</sup>

### ***Analysis***

In providing structured activities to Aceh's tsunami survivors, the performance-healing programs implemented by INGOs certainly offered participants a welcome distraction from their

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<sup>349</sup> *Rising Above the Tsunami: Restoration and Recovery Through Reviving the Acehese Intangible Cultural Heritage* (DVD. UNESCO and Sacred Bridge, 2006).

<sup>350</sup> Peter Biro, "Remembering the Tsunami's Victims through Dance," *International Rescue Committee* (April 11, 2007), <http://www.theirc.org/news/remembering-tsunamis-victims-through-dance-4233> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*

emotional distress and the hardships that accompany life in the barracks.<sup>352</sup> The consistent effort of these organizations to use local cultural traditions and, as with AMURTEL and UNESCO, to involve local performers and performance instructors in the programs also may have contributed to their success. This point becomes clear when comparing these performance-healing programs to other INGO healing efforts that imposed Western-based definitions of healing and trauma upon Acehnese society. As I mentioned earlier, Shaharom (2006) and Miller (2005) have criticized foreign aid workers for over-diagnosing cases of PTSD and failing to realize that many Acehnese are more concerned with receiving job training, education, or other activities than psychological assessment. By using performance styles with which many Acehnese were familiar, these INGO programs were more likely to have been a source of relief and comfort than other approaches.

At the same time, these programs were limited in several respects. First, many of them were only able to reach a small section of Acehnese society for a short period of time, most likely because of funding restrictions. Because the programs were often designed to teach performance activities for several months, or to result in a final performance, many of the participants would not be able to continue their performance activities in the absence of these INGOs. For example, UNESCO's "Rising Above the Tsunami" program gave children little opportunity to continue their education in Acehnese music and dance practices once it ended in June 2006. Because building musical skills requires constant practice, the participants were not able to sustain their performance activities by themselves; as refugees living in temporary shelters, they lacked the time or space to strengthen their performance skills. Moreover, Iwan Amir notes that the most exciting aspect of Acehnese traditional arts—the improvisatory

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<sup>352</sup> For more on the kinds of struggles that women faced within the temporary shelters in Aceh, see Aris Ananta and Lee Poh Onn, eds., *Aceh, A New Dawn* (2007), and Rhona MacDonald, "How Women were Affected by the Tsunami: A Perspective from Oxfam" (2005).

elements of the singing and oral story-telling genres—takes intense practice with a professional artist. When these artists were no longer available, the participants had to learn repetitive choral and drum parts, which could quickly become boring.<sup>353</sup>

The UNESCO program also drew criticism for its use of funds. According to Amir, the funds that UNESCO spent on flying 48 participants to Jakarta would have been better spent on higher-quality instruments that the children could have continued to use after the program's completion. Instead, Amir explains, “children used makeshift musical instruments such as tin drums that substitute *rapa'i*, or had to watch passively as their teacher played the *seurune kalee*. The official explanation for this—which was to teach the children the value of working with materials from their surroundings—contrasted wildly with the lavish end-of-project show.”<sup>354</sup> This suggests that the Jakarta performance, and perhaps the entire “Rising Above the Tsunami” program, functioned primarily as a display of UNESCO's success for interested elite, rather than as a means of trauma recovery for Aceh's tsunami survivors. For Amir, the prioritization of this week-long Jakarta performance over efforts that might have had longer-term effects reflects the views of Jakarta's “cultural elite,” who see Acehnese performing arts as “fixed symbols inherited from a distant past rather than something to be re-oriented as a fully-functional means of consumption, entertainment, and education for present-day communities.”<sup>355</sup>

A third limitation within INGO performance-healing efforts lies in an overemphasis on the tsunami as *the* cause of suffering among Acehnese. In all of the organizations mentioned above, performance-healing efforts were specifically aimed to address trauma resulting from the tsunami. This approach ignored the fact that Acehnese society had experienced almost thirty

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<sup>353</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 251.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 249-50.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 252.

years of violent conflict before the tsunami hit, and that Acehese individuals are likely to have accumulated multiple traumatic experiences, or “complex trauma.”<sup>356</sup> Moreover, the areas of Aceh that were hardest hit by the tsunami (Banda Aceh, Aceh Besar, Calang, and Meulaboh) are different from the areas that were most affected by the conflict (Pidie, Bireuen, and Aceh Utara). With so many organizations flooding in to tsunami-affected areas in 2005, individuals in conflict-affected areas began to feel that they were given unequal attention and aid.<sup>357</sup>

An overemphasis on the tsunami as not only the cause of suffering but also a key factor in ending the conflict may have also caused participants to feel that they were supposed to suddenly forget about the conflict and move on with their lives. This message may also have been communicated through the term “post-conflict,” which was used to describe many INGO rehabilitation and recovery programs. As numerous scholars have shown, the concept of an “aftermath,” or of a period of “post-” conflict in which violence ceases to exist, is a fabrication that obscures the continuing violence that communities—particularly women—often experience. In this sense, violence—whether physical, psychological, or emotional—can continue into periods of “peace,” and must continue to be addressed through long-term recovery efforts.<sup>358</sup>

Finally, these INGO performance-healing efforts were limited in their ability to address the specific needs of Acehese individuals, particularly women and girls. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the conflict and the tsunami may have produced a societal atmosphere that discouraged women and girls from engaging in performance practices. While the conflict made it unsafe for women to engage in public activities and to openly express their grievances, the tsunami and the implementation of *syariah* law also suggested that women’s

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<sup>356</sup> International Organization for Migration, “Psychosocial Needs Assessment,” 3-4.

<sup>357</sup> Ananta and Onn, *Aceh: A New Dawn*, 32.

<sup>358</sup> Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman, *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 3-4.

responsibilities lie within the domestic sphere and that women are not welcome in community decision-making. Moreover, the tsunami took the lives of many female Acehese artists. Though the RAT program brought in local performers to teach children traditional songs and dances, there were no female Acehese instructors and only a handful of non-Acehese women involved. Video footage from the RAT rehearsals also reveals that the majority of the participants in these programs were boys.<sup>359</sup> As a result of all of these factors, Acehese girls may have felt uncomfortable participating in activities that encouraged them to openly express their feelings within such a male-dominated space. Further, the lack of female role models may have signaled to the girls that performance is the realm of men, and that their participation in the RAT program was a one-time opportunity to engage in arts performance. Thus, despite these organizations' efforts to offer equal performance opportunities to Acehese boys and to Acehese girls, societal assumptions about gender roles as well as the small numbers of female artists within Acehese society may have prevented Acehese girls from fully benefiting from the programs. It is also unclear whether their participation in the RAT program caused Acehese girls to see the arts as a healing mechanism that would be available to them in the future.

### **Local Organizations**

In addition to the performance-healing programs provided by INGOs, several local organizations also included Acehese performance practices within trauma recovery efforts. In some cases, these local organizations collaborated with INGOs. The programs I will discuss in this section were implemented by Taloe, Tikar Pandan, the Center for the Study and Protection of Children (PKPA), and the Pulih Foundation.

### ***Traditional Arts and Lectures Organization***

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<sup>359</sup> *Rising Above the Tsunami.*



The Traditional Arts and Lectures Organization (Taloe) was created by Mor Murtala, an Acehese dancer, as a means of increasing local knowledge about Acehese traditional performance and addressing villagers' emotional needs following the conflict and the tsunami. With financial assistance from Caritas Czech Republic (CCR), Taloe initiated a traditional arts program that aimed to help children who were victims of both the conflict and the tsunami to deal with their experiences of trauma. The program lasted from February 2005 to December 2008 and reached villages in Aceh Besar and Banda Aceh.

In 2005, Taloe implemented traditional Acehese performance-healing workshops in four villages, one school, and one orphanage in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar. The workshops, which continued for ten months, focused on teaching between six to eight traditional dances to a group of children, who would eventually perform the dances in the schools or orphanages of their village, or in public performances, such as cultural festivals and holiday celebrations. In Banda Aceh, for example, the childrens' training resulted in a mass performance at Taman Budaya, a cultural park, for an audience of 700 individuals.<sup>360</sup>

From February to December 2006, Taloe worked with the German organization, Kinder Not Hilfe (KNH), in six different areas, including refugee camps, schools and orphanages in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar. Taloe remained in Aceh Besar in 2007, working with five villages and one elementary school, primarily in conflict-affected areas. In December 2008, when the performance-healing programs were scheduled to end, CCR conducted a program evaluation and established a plan for future funding. CCR secured an additional ten months for Taloe to continue their psychosocial healing activities by targeting Taloe teachers and working with the Jakarta-based organization, the Pulih Foundation.

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<sup>360</sup> Mor Murtala, email message to author, May 17, 2010.

In my correspondence with Yani, the CCR project manager for Taloe, Yani suggested that one of the reasons Taloe chose to use traditional Acehese dance was because it is difficult to learn. In this way, when the children successfully learned the rhythm and patterns of the dance movements, they felt extremely proud and confident, particularly within public performances. In working with the Pulih Foundation, an organization that addresses the psychological traumas resulting from violence, Taloe members were also able to identify psychological benefits that performing traditional dance could provide. Because Acehese dance demands such high concentration and physical coordination, Yani commented that it was good for “connecting the left and right brain.”<sup>361</sup> Yani also felt that traditional Acehese dance was appropriate for trauma recovery because it is performed in a group, which encourages solidarity and building trust among children participants. The 2008 evaluation of Taloe reported, “in the process of teaching, teachers act as sisters and brothers of the children, they develop warmth and good relationship with the children so the children would have close relationship with the teachers.”<sup>362</sup> In addition, Taloe evaluators found, “performing the dance in front of public is very helpful in the process of developing self confidence of the children. They also feel happy and proud to show their competency in the dancing. Usually children become more enthusiastic to practice dancing after the first performance and before each performance. They also develop a climate of teamwork among the team to perform as good as possible. With the performance, they could also meet other people and know more people from other areas.”<sup>363</sup>

In addition, Taloe’s activities aimed to familiarize Acehese children with their own performance traditions. Syeh Lah Guenta, a popular Acehese musician, explains, “we have to

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<sup>361</sup> Yani, email message to author, July 23, 2008.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

understand, in the recent decades, Acehnese art did not develop ‘normally.’ With the tsunami what came first looked like a final blow. Further advancement of the arts must start from scratch.”<sup>364</sup> Through entertaining lectures, Taloe staff members attempted to fill the gaps in the participants’ knowledge about Acehnese cultural traditions. According to Mor Murtala, “they now learned about a part of an identity that could bring pride to many people (friends, family, and others). This was really a mental and spiritual awakening for the children after the earthquake and the tsunami.”<sup>365</sup>

### ***Tikar Pandan***

Like Taloe, Tikar Pandan is a performance group that used traditional Acehnese arts to address trauma resulting from both the conflict and the tsunami. However, Tikar Pandan differs from Taloe in several respects. Founded in 2002, Tikar Pandan is a traveling group that takes its performances to the villages, rather than holding instruction-based workshops. Second, though Tikar Pandan supports a range of performance activities, its healing activities in Aceh drew primarily from Aceh’s written and oral story-telling traditions. Third, Tikar Pandan began their arts-healing activities while the conflict was still going on. Because of the presence of security forces, checkpoints, and curfews, they often had to limit their activities to the daytime and secure a permit from military commanders.

The types of performances that Tikar Pandan presented to villagers were a combination of *hikayat* traditions, *sinetron* (Indonesian soap operas), news broadcasts, and stand-up comedy. The subject matter of these performances included anything from current events to an open discussion of the conflict. When the tsunami struck, Tikar Pandan was able to pursue its

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<sup>364</sup> *Rising Above the Tsunami*.

<sup>365</sup> Mor Murtala, email message to author, May 13, 2010. Indonesian: “*Mereka belajar sebagai sebuah identitas yang dapat dibanggakan pada banyak orang (teman, keluarga dan orang lain) ini sangat membangun mental dan spirit anak-anak pasca gempa dan tsunami.*”

performance-healing activities more freely. They worked with the Koordinatoriat Bangkit Aceh (Aceh Development Coordinator) to find artists who had survived the tsunami and to provide musical instruments, sculpting tools, etc., so that they could continue their crafts. They also visited refugee children in the villages and barracks.

Tikar Pandan's show, TV Eng-Ong, was developed soon after the tsunami hit in December 2004. Working with older traditional artists (ages 50-70) as well as students from Acehese Universities who were musicians, poets, story-tellers, and actors, Tikar Pandan held discussions with these individuals to determine the content of the Eng-Ong show. They drew on themes from classical stories, Acehese folklore, and poems to produce modern stories that audiences could identify with. When the Tikar Pandan bus arrived in a village, the group would set up a cardboard television set and present a parody news show, complete with cardboard video cameras and microphones.

Fozan Santa, one of the founders of Tikar Pandan, claims that the performances were effective in getting the children to laugh and to open up about their experiences. He told me that they were able to discuss "anything and everything," as long as it was voiced through the language of the arts. The performances were also deemed beneficial because of their participatory nature. Santa explains, "both the viewers and the conflict victims were actively involved in the performance, letting go of all the troubling issues that had, up to this point, affected their lives."<sup>366</sup> Though Santa admitted that the arts could not heal all problems, he believed that programs like his could stimulate creative activity and would encourage participants to preserve their traditional cultural practices.

### ***Other Organizations***

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<sup>366</sup> Fozan Santa, email message to author, October 11, 2009. Indonesian: "*Para penonton atau korban konflik bisa terlibat aktif dalam pertunjukan dengan melepaskan semua hal yang selama ini menekan kehidupan mereka.*"

In addition to these programs, there were a number of other local NGOs that became involved in performance-healing programs, although their focus is not normally on performance activities. For example, the Center for the Study and Protection of Children (*Pusat Kajian dan Perlindungan Anak*, or, PKPA) worked with Taloe, conducting research about the programs that would help to secure funding. PKPA is a non-profit organization that was founded in October, 1996, in order to protect the rights of women and children in North Sumatra. They have several different programs that aim to address how children are affected by poverty, trafficking, and domestic violence. Though they are based in Medan, PKPA set up branch offices in Aceh and Nias after the tsunami to carry out psychosocial activities. These activities included art-making, which aimed to give the children an outlet to express their emotions, and playing games, which served to strengthen their sense of community and build trust with their peers.

The Pulih Foundation, a Jakarta-based NGO that focuses on psychological trauma recovery, also collaborated with Taloe and Caritas Czech Republic in Aceh after the tsunami. The Pulih Foundation was founded on July 24, 2002, in order to provide psychological support for survivors of natural disasters, mass violence, domestic abuse, sexual assault, and other forms of violence. They offer counseling services, a 24-hour hotline, support groups, training for volunteers, and expert witnesses for legal cases. They also conduct research and publish books, videos and other materials that address psychosocial issues within the communities with whom they work. In response to the tsunami in Aceh, the Pulih Foundation developed an office in Banda Aceh in 2005. In addition to providing counseling and conducting research concerning the psychological impact of the tsunami on Acehnese communities, Pulih Foundation staff members also worked with Taloe to understand the psychological benefits that traditional dance performance could offer participants.

### *Analysis*

One of the most obvious differences between the programs developed by local NGOs and those of INGOs is that the local organizations focused equally on the conflict and the tsunami as sources of distress and trauma. In this way, their healing activities gave participants an opportunity to engage with both events within a safe environment, rather than prioritizing one event, or making participants feel as though they needed to suppress their memories of the conflict. Further, because the programs were developed by NGOs that are based in or have branches in Aceh, it is easier for the programs to continue working with Acehnese communities several years after the tsunami, rather than having to pull out after a specified period of time.

Despite these benefits, local NGO healing efforts were still limited by funding and resources. For example, although financial assistance from CCR enabled Taloe to increase their staff and extend their reach across Aceh, this fiscal relationship may have interfered with Taloe staff members' ability to concentrate on achieving Taloe's goals. For Murtala, who had taught dance to tsunami survivors as a volunteer for over three months before founding Taloe, the relatively large amount of money that instructors received from the international organization caused them to focus more on their pay and less on their work with Acehnese children.<sup>367</sup> This was also the concern of Fozan Santa, who believed that working with government organizations would ultimately bureaucratize Tikar Pandan, creating divisions between their directors and the villagers for whom they performed. For Santa, it is imperative that the ideas of Tikar Pandan's directors, writers, and performers reach society, and that the organization continues to grow from interactions with their audiences. But without a consistent source of funding, Tikar Pandan was limited in its ability to reach Acehnese communities. While the conflict significantly restricted

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<sup>367</sup> Mor Murtala, email message to author, May 19, 2010.

Tikar Pandan's activities, the organization also struggled after the tsunami to extend their programs across Aceh, given their small numbers of staff and volunteers. Today, both Mor Murtala and Fozan Santa are unsure whether the children they taught have continued to develop their relationship with Acehese performing arts. Mor Murtala explained, "I think several of the locations where Taloe taught are still practicing and making arts groups in their village, but I'm not entirely sure."<sup>368</sup>

Like many of the international organizations, these local performance groups also faced the challenge of providing activities that could address the needs of all members of a given community, and tended to direct healing efforts primarily towards children. In Taloe's case, this may have been due to CCR funding regulations, or existing beliefs about the facility with which children, as opposed to adults, can pick up new dance and music routines. In my own observations of one of Taloe's performance-healing sessions in August 2009, the children's parents sat around the stage, watching disinterestedly as their children rehearsed. It was clear that their village had not yet benefited from the reconstruction of homes and schools that was taking place in nearby areas. When I asked one of the mothers a question about the rehearsals, she responded by asking me why I hadn't brought her money. This suggested to me that any entertainment or recreational activities going on within their village would not be fully appreciated until the adults had seen material or economic improvements.

The performances that Tikar Pandan brought to villages also aimed to offer equal healing opportunities to all community members—men and women, old and young, abled and disabled. Because the performances were lively and interactive, all community members were given a chance to participate, rather than some members having a chance to take part while others sat by

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<sup>368</sup> Mor Murtala, email message to author, May 17, 2010. Indonesian: "*Ini yang saya kurang tahu, tapi di beberapa lokasi yang diajarkan taloe saya kira masih tetap latihan dan menjadi grup kesenian di desa mereka tapi saya tidak tahu pasti sekarang.*"

as passive on-lookers. When asked why Tikar Pandan structured their performances this way, Fozan Santa explained, “we very much gave precedence to children, women, and youth groups to include them in each of our performances, because we believe they will play an important role in helping to sustain the peace.”<sup>369</sup> In this way, Tikar Pandan’s performances served not only to address traumatic emotions that had their roots in the past, but to promote a climate of peace that could extend into the future.

Finally, the different ways in which gender identity influenced how Acehese children responded to these arts activities must also be considered. Despite the fact that Taloe instructors aimed to provide equal performance opportunities for both Acehese boys and girls, existing societal expectations and gender norms may have caused Acehese children to have different attitudes towards performing traditional dance. Reflecting on his experience working with Acehese children, Murtala commented, “There is definitely a difference between men and women. Boys usually consider dancing to be women’s work, and it is usually very easy to teach girls to dance. However, for the kids with trauma it was more difficult [to teach] the girls because their activities are usually just in the house and it was difficult for them to forget things, and because usually they are not as free as the guys.”<sup>370</sup> This observation is consistent with conversations I have had with Acehese women regarding their perceived responsibilities within Acehese culture. Though certainly not all Acehese girls are expected to remain anchored to their domestic life, the conflict and the tsunami significantly impeded female mobility and

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<sup>369</sup> Fozan Santa, email message to author, October 11, 2009. Indonesian: “*Kami sangat mendahulukan anak-anak, perempuan dan para pemuda untuk aktif dalam setiap pertunjukan kami. Sebab kami percaya merekalah yang bisa melanjutkan perdamaian setelah konflik aceh, tanpa trauma yang bekepanjangan setelah melihat pertunjukan kami.*”

<sup>370</sup> Mor Murtala, email message to author, May 16, 2010. Indonesian: “*Perbedaan pasti ada antara laki-laki dan perempuan, anak-anak laki-laki biasanya menganggap menari adalah pekerjaan perempuan dan anak-anak perempuan biasanya sangat mudah diajak menari. Namun pada anak yang trauma lebih sulit pada yang perempuan karena aktivitas mereka biasanya hanya dirumah dan sulit melupakan sesuatu karena biasanya mereka tidak sebebaskan laki-laki.*”



reinforced the notion that women should stay at home to care for their families. Mor's comment that "they are not as free as the guys" also suggests that women's limited mobility prevented them from accessing outlets for dealing with or expressing their trauma. In this way, Taloe's activities, which drew Acehese girls away from their domestic responsibilities and brought them into a setting that encouraged the open expression of emotions, might have been a welcome interruption into Acehese girls' lives. But these activities may also have been unfamiliar and unsettling, and it is not surprising that some female participants would be reluctant to participate or "difficult" to teach. Moreover, the large number of male instructors and staff members may have reinforced girls' assumptions that performance in general, or performance as a healing tool, is a predominantly male activity.

### **Individual Performers**

In addition to these kinds of formal programs that were established specifically for purposes of trauma recovery for Acehese conflict or tsunami survivors, there have also been performances, songs, and other creative efforts by individual Acehese performers that may have facilitated healing and recovery. This section focuses on the work of Marzuki Hasan, Agus Nur Amal, and other Acehese artists who have helped to create healing opportunities for Acehese.

#### ***Marzuki Hasan***

Born in Blang Pidie, Marzuki Hasan (known as "Pak Uki" or simply "Uki" to friends and students) is an Acehese performer who began teaching Acehese dance in the 1960s in villages all over Aceh. At sixty-seven years old, he currently teaches Acehese dance and Acehese music at the Jakarta Arts Institute, and continues to travel all over the world to share his performances with eager audiences. He is also skilled at a type of responsive sung poetry that, he claims, is part of Aceh's tradition. Uki frequently collaborates with other artists, developing

Acehnese dance and music so that it remains interesting to audiences already familiar with the traditional dances.

For Uki, the Acehnese performing arts are important for strengthening Acehnese cultural identity, uniting Acehnese communities, and bringing joy to the diverse audiences that encounter Acehnese arts forms. For this reason, Uki strongly believes that Acehnese dance, music, and poetry have provided a sense of peace and balance during Aceh's many conflicts, and have played an important role for Acehnese communities following the tsunami.<sup>371</sup> Along with several other artists, Uki participated in UNESCO's "Rising Above the Tsunami" program, training instructors and working with refugee children who were living in tents and other temporary living facilities. After spending the day working with different groups of children, Uki would then discuss the children's progress with UNESCO's team of psychologists and cultural program specialists.

Uki believed that the dances he taught to the children helped them overcome their trauma by giving them something entertaining to do and strengthening their sense of kinship with their peers. He also believed that traveling to Jakarta for the final performance was an exciting event for the children, who may not have had that opportunity otherwise. Uki commented, "through this program, each of us has established a deep emotional bond. This is certainly not easy; even now several weeks after the program, the relationship still goes on and is felt deeply. The inter-relationships among young instructors and the children in the barracks also grow deeper. They often arrange to get together from time to time. So I see this as a very positive program. If only we could extend it beyond Banda Aceh to the other places."<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> *Dance Artist Marsuki Hasan*, <http://www.tamanismailmarzuki.com/tokoh/hasan.html> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>372</sup> *Rising Above the Tsunami*.

One of the challenges Uki encountered was teaching children who had experienced a significant degree of trauma. Uki commented, “There are some disobedient [kids] also. There are some who have a Dad, but don’t have a Mom. There are some who have a Mom, but don’t have a Dad. There are those who have no Mom, no Dad, and they live with their relatives over there in a hut...It’s extraordinarily sad. These kids also extraordinarily naughty. Yes, that’s what the trainers had to confront...It took a great deal of patience!”<sup>373</sup> One of Uki’s colleagues, Ismail Sarong, also remarked, “It is to be expected that the orphans become naughty and a bit wild, especially in the barracks. Therefore I always remind myself and our artists: be patient. I almost lost it in Rukoh Darussalam when they stepped on the *rappa’i* and ran into guitars. But I remembered, the challenge is to become close with them.”<sup>374</sup> By working together with UNESCO’s psychologists, Uki and the other professional artists explored different methods in order to effectively teach the tsunami survivors.

In addition to the three months Uki spent working within the RAT program, Uki has performed in benefit concerts around the world and has collaborated with his students to create a dance called *Meusaboh Hatee* (“Unified Hearts”) as a tribute to tsunami survivors. As an instructor, Uki has also educated audiences about Aceh’s cultural practices through seminars, conferences, and various media appearances. He has also played a significant role facilitating the development of Saman dance groups within Jakarta, which ensure that this Acehese tradition lives on. Ultimately Uki hopes Acehese dance and music will become internationally

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<sup>373</sup> Marzuki Hasan, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 29, 2010. Indonesian: “*Ada nakalnya juga, ada yang punya ayah, ngak punya Ma. Tahu? Ada yang punya Ibu tidak punya Bapak. Ada yang sudah tidak punya Mama, tidak punya Bapak, tinggal dengan saudara di situ, di bedeng-bedeng itu...Sedih luar biasa. Anak nakalnya juga luar biasa. Ya, itu yang harus dihadapi oleh orang-orang yang sebagai pelatih...Nah itu perlu sebuah kesabaran yang luar biasa.*”

<sup>374</sup> *Rising Above the Tsunami.*

known, such that people around the world associate Aceh with its unique cultural practices rather than violence or disaster alone.

***Agus Nur Amal***

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Agus Nur Amal is an Acehnese theater performer who has addressed the conflict and the tsunami within his one-man *hikayat* shows. A recent graduate of Jakarta's Arts Institute (IKJ) and a self-identified "troubadour," Agus is based in Jakarta, but frequently travels to Aceh. His performances have covered such topics as political elections and corruption, social welfare, the 2002 Bali bombings, the GAM conflict and the 2004 tsunami. In 2000, an intense moment within the Aceh conflict, Agus created *Hikayat Hamzah Fansuri Anak Dunia*, a story that explains the existence of the rebellion in Aceh by focusing on Hamzah Fansuri, a well-known Sufi writer from Aceh who, in the sixteenth century, was one of the first Southeast Asians to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>375</sup> Agus has also participated in NGO-sponsored events, such as the International Day for Disaster Reduction festival, which was held in Aceh and Nias, and featured music, dance, and other arts activities for local children.<sup>376</sup>

Agus originally took an interest in *hikayat* performance after growing dissatisfied with "modern theater." He explains, "I'm interested in things that are more simple, which I think is something the *hikayat* art form can offer because it is performed by one person. Then, there are also other interesting issues in *hikayat*: for example, the actor can perform with singers, or sing responsive poetry with one another. That's interesting to me. Further, there's a dimension of

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<sup>375</sup> Mary Heidhues, *A Concise History of Southeast Asia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 81.

<sup>376</sup> UN Office of the Recovery Coordinator, "Nias and Aceh Celebrates International Day for Disaster Reduction" (November 11, 2007), [http://61.8.73.117/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=190&Itemid=236](http://61.8.73.117/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=190&Itemid=236) (accessed April 25, 2012).

intimacy between the actor and...the audience. That's also interesting to me, and it's something I didn't find in modern Indonesian theater."<sup>377</sup>

Because *hikayat* encourages an intimate relationship between the actor and the audience and because it involves spontaneous, creative improvisation in which audience members can take part, Agus thought that *hikayat* performances might be particularly beneficial to villagers in Aceh, who were suffering from violence and the hostile presence of military troops. From 1998-2001, Agus took his *hikayat* shows to Aceh, performing at refugee camps and in front of mosques from 1998-2001. He also performed *teka-teki*, or "riddles," which encouraged loud, enthusiastic replies from audience members.

Community members were also actively involved in Agus's performances when he invited them to perform alongside him. Some of these community members were former *hikayat* artists who had stopped performing because of the GAM conflict. Together they created shows, some of which openly discussed the violence. Agus explained, "as far as I know, during the conflict, 1998-2003, there were a lot of traditional *hikayat* performers who couldn't perform because they made their shows at night, and, yeah, it wasn't permitted. It was forbidden. They were afraid. But from there, actually, there were a lot of works from *hikayat* artists and poets, who wrote about the period of conflict. Like Mahkaket. He's a *hikayat* performer who wrote and arranged a lot of spontaneous compositions. Pieces about the conflict period, his fate during

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<sup>377</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 8, 2010. Indonesian: "*Saya tertarik pada hal yang lebih simple, yang saya kira ada pada seni berhikayat, karena dimainkan oleh satu orang. Kemudian, juga ada hal hal yang menarik dalam seni berhikayat tersebut misalnya si aktor bermain dengan penyanyi, atau bersaling pantun. Itu menarik buat saya. Kemudian, ada dimensi keakraban antara aktor dengan pemain. Eh, aktor dengan penonton. Juga itu menarik buat saya, yang saya tidak temui dalam teater-teater moderen Indonesia.*"

the conflict. Also there was Alih Akbar. He's in Banda Aceh, in Longha. Yes, there's a lot of compositions about the conflict period."<sup>378</sup>

Agus's work in Aceh thus served not only to entertain villagers, but also to give them opportunities to perform their own artistic creations. One of the most memorable performances for Agus was given by a woman named Cut Poh. According to Agus, most of the villagers he invited to perform gave shows that lasted only ten minutes or so, but Cut Poh performed for over thirty minutes and left all audience members in tears from her moving story. Agus recalled:

She was from Sigli. She had just moved to Banda Aceh one month ago because in Sigli her husband was abducted, yes, he disappeared during the conflict. She had already looked everywhere for him; she couldn't do it anymore, she said. So she went to Banda Aceh in search of safety. Just one month in Banda Aceh, and then—hit by the tsunami. Now, the story she told was: 'I've lived just one month in Banda Aceh. I've only lived in Banda Aceh one month, I don't know where my husband is...then I was hit by this colossal wave.' Her story went on like that. Everyone was sad. Now, she had one child, a child who was still small. Her child didn't like his mother performing *hikayat*. 'Mama, don't perform *hikayat*, I don't like it,' he said, until he was crying. He didn't like his mother telling a story all about his life, probably, that child. But that was the first woman to emerge within our *hikayat* forum.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: "Setahu saya selama zaman konflik, itu 98-2003lah, begitu, banyak penghikayat-penghikayat tradisi yang tidak bisa tampil karena membuat acara di malam hari, ya, tidak diperbolehkan. Dilarang, begitu, takut. Tapi dari situ juga sebetulnya banyak karya-karya dari penghikayat-penyair yang menuliskan karya-karya mengenai masa konflik. Itu seperti Mahkaket. Dia penghikayat, dia banyak menuliskan, mengaranglah, spontan, begitu, ya? Karya-karya di zaman konflik, nasib dia zaman konflik. Juga ada Alih Akbar. Dia di Banda Aceh di Longha, ada juga banyak mengarang tentang masa konflik."

<sup>379</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: "Dia orang Sigli. Baru satu bulan dia pindah ke Banda Aceh, karena di Sigli, suaminya diculik, ah, hilang zaman konflik. Dia udah cari kesana kemari, ngak sanggup lagi, dia bilang dia pergi ke Banda Aceh untuk cari selamat. Baru satu bulan di Banda Aceh, kena tsunami. Nah, dia ceritai... 'Saya baru satu bulan di Banda Aceh, suami saya ngak tahu di mana...kena pula saya ditimpa air raya.' Begitu diceritai. Begitu semua orang sedih. Nah, dia punya anak-anak satu. Anak-anak masih kecil. Anaknya tidak suka Ibunya tampil hikayat."

Agus also brought *hikayat* performances to Aceh following the 2004 tsunami. Again working with local artists, he wrote and performed *Hikayat Tsunami*, which, Agus explains, served three primary purposes: “The first story we want to tell was that the [2004] tsunami didn’t just happen in Aceh. It also happened in Bangladesh, in India, etc. And also, tsunamis have happened before this one in Aceh. Thus, disasters like this have been experienced by humans before—disasters that claimed just as many victims as this one. We also depicted what happened when Krakatoa exploded. A century ago tens of thousands of people were killed... Actually, the disaster could have been mitigated if people had known how to confront disasters... Second, our goal was indeed to entertain, to make people laugh, to make people happy. Third, we also wanted to invite them, the audience, to perform too, so they could be happy. So they could be happy and express their feelings, their feelings of anxiety, etc.”<sup>380</sup>

In 2005, 2006, and 2007, Agus collaborated with Tikar Pandan, creating shows within their TV Eng-Ong performance. Together, they traveled to various refugee barracks, bringing performances that all community members could enjoy and participate in. These shows functioned not only to entertain, but also to provide an open forum for the community to discuss their concerns. One issue that Agus found particularly disconcerting was the onslaught of disturbing tsunami imagery that Indonesian television continued to display. Watching from Jakarta, Agus recalls watching dead bodies being thrown into pits, or seeing piles of corpses as

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*‘Mama jangan hikayat, aku ngak suka,’ dia bilang. Sampai nganggis-nganggis. Dia tidak suka mamanya mengisahkan hidupnya, barangkali, si anaknya. Tapi itu tokoh perempuan yang pertama muncul dalam forum ketika kita hikayat, begitu.’*

<sup>380</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: “Ceritanya pertama kami ingin mengatakan bahwa tsunami itu tidak hanya terjadi di Aceh. Dia juga terjadi di Bangladesh, dia juga terjadi di India, begitu. Dan juga pernah terjadi sebelum terjadi di Aceh. Jadi bencana ini pernah dialami juga oleh manusia sebelumnya. Yang membawa korban sama banyak ya juga. Kita gambarkan juga mengenai terjadinya meletusnya gunung Krakatoa. Satu abad yang lalu puluhan ribu orang juga tewas, begitu... Yang sebetulnya, bencana tersebut bisa dikurangi kalau juga manusianya sadar bagaimana menghadapi bencana. Ada pengetahuan bagaimana menghadapi bencana. Kedua, tujuannya memang untuk menghibur, jadi untuk membuat orang itu tertawa, untuk membuat orang senang. Ketiga, juga mengajak mereka untuk, penonton, untuk ikut bermain, supaya senang, begitu. Supaya senang dan bisa mengungkapkan perasaannya. Perasaan kegelisahannya, begitu.”

the media played these images day after day. He commented, “Indonesian TV showed the tsunami disaster as a thing of suffering...Every single day, over and over again. It became like a commercial, a commercial that shows tsunami victims’ corpses...It was not good. They were still human beings.”<sup>381</sup> By creating fake news shows with Tikar Pandan performers, the artists encouraged Acehnese communities to think critically about how they are being represented to the world, and to seek ways to confront these negative depictions.

More recently, Agus has used his *hikayat* performances to educate and entertain Acehnese about their election processes. Working with Tikar Pandan in March 2009, the artists performed in the show, “TV Eng-Ong: A Social Parody for a Peaceful Election.”<sup>382</sup> The performance addressed practical questions audience members might have had about voting and offered comedic portrayals of the candidates. It took place in four different locations and involved other performers, including Aidil Adhari, Hanum Indria, Armansyah, and Akmal MR. Agus continues to perform in villages in Aceh and has appeared in several films, including *Untuk Rena*.

### ***Other Artists***

In addition to the efforts of Marzuki Hasan and Agus Nur Amal, other Acehnese artists have also sought to help Acehnese recover from the conflict and the tsunami. Rafly, for example, is a famous Acehnese singer who wrote, “Lagu Anak Aceh,” or “Acehnese Children’s Song,” in response to the tsunami and the conflict. The song depicts the life of a child who lives in a refugee camp and who has lost his father. Despite the hardships this child and other

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: “*Televisi di Indonesia mempertontonkan bencana tsunami itu sesuatu yang menderit...Berhari-hari, diulang-ulang. Sudah semacam iklan aja, begitu. Iklan mempertontonkan mayat-mayat yang korban tsunami...Tidak baik, begitu. Itukan juga manusia.*”

<sup>382</sup> Akmal M. Roem, “From PM-Toh Aceh Modern Kampanyekan Pemilu Damai di Aceh” (March 31, 2009), <http://aamovi.wordpress.com/2009/03/31/pm-toh-aceh-modern-kampanyekan-pemilu-damai-di-aceh/> (accessed April 25, 2012).



Acehnese have experienced, Rafly urges listeners to keep their faith strong so that disaster will not return to Aceh.<sup>383</sup> His performances have appeared on national television and have helped “to alleviate the trauma of the tsunami survivors through music.”<sup>384</sup> Rafly, along with other popular artists, was also hired by the BRR to spread the message of peace throughout Aceh. Kartomi writes, “He creates peace songs that feature traditional Acehnese music-making techniques, including interlocking body percussion, as well as many musical influences from the international pop media.”<sup>385</sup>

Sarjev, an Acehnese musician, poet, painter, and dancer, has also contributed to Acehnese healing efforts by promoting Acehnese performance traditions and organizing performance events. Based in Jakarta, Sarjev frequently travels to Aceh to organize cultural activities and spread awareness about Acehnese arts practices. Following the tsunami, he organized many of the performances given by children tsunami survivors and encouraged community members to take part in the various performance-healing programs offered by international and local NGOs. For Sarjev, the tsunami created an opportunity to secure international support for the development of Acehnese arts forms. In 2010, however, almost six years after the tsunami struck, he claims that the tsunami is “no longer sexy”<sup>386</sup> and support for Acehnese arts is waning. By encouraging younger performers to take an interest in Acehnese culture, Sarjev hopes to bring Acehnese traditions to diverse audiences.

### *Analysis*

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<sup>383</sup> A music video of “Lagu Anak Aceh,” containing lyrics in Acehnese and in Indonesian can be viewed here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tA80D8ERGpk&feature=PlayList&p=47728D23FFC494C1&playnext=1&playnext\\_from=PL&index=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tA80D8ERGpk&feature=PlayList&p=47728D23FFC494C1&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=1)

<sup>384</sup> Kartomi, “Surviving Conflict.”

<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

<sup>386</sup> Sarjev, personal communication with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 15, 2010.

In using Acehnese performance to address feelings of trauma that the conflict and the tsunami produced in Aceh, the individual artists discussed above shared many of the same aims as international and local organizations. For example, the arts activities that Pak Uki, Agus Nur Amal and Sarjev introduced helped to create a safe space for creative expression. In response to Agus's *hikayat* performances, one village elder remarked, "During the conflict our society couldn't gather together like this. If we met like this, it's because we were forced by the army, to be gathered together and searched...But for a *hikayat* show, we can gather together and I can express my problems."<sup>387</sup>

Another aim of the Acehnese artists was to educate community members about Acehnese performance and to build support for the arts. To this end they not only involved local performers, encouraging them to return to their craft, but also taught younger generations about their cultural traditions. While Agus invited *hikayat* artists to perform shows with him, Uki devoted much of his time to lecturing the children about the history of Acehnese music and dances, their transformation over the years, and their contemporary significance as part of Acehnese identity. Uki's efforts to educate tsunami survivors about their own performance traditions may have helped them to connect with the arts practices and to feel proud of their cultural identity. Without his assistance, the children may have felt that dances from other parts of Indonesia or from any other country would have been just as entertaining. In contrast to Uki's audiences, Agus found that most children he encountered were already familiar with *hikayat* because they had seen him perform on television. For Agus, it was important that villagers recognized *hikayat* as a cultural tradition unique to Aceh. He explains, "the values within our

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<sup>387</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 8, 2010. Indonesian: "*Selama konflik kita masyarakat tidak bisa berkumpul seperti ini. Kalaupun kita berkumpul seperti ini, itu pasti karena dipaksa oleh tentara begitu, dikumpuli untuk dicari...Nah, karena ada acara hikayat, kita bisa berkumpul dan saya bisa mengungkapkan masalah-masalah saya.*"

traditions gave us hope to live. During the conflict, people lived with a lot of chaos, their thoughts were jumbled. Their thoughts were full of fear. It was the only hope, to return to tradition.”<sup>388</sup>

Uki, Agus, and other Acehese artists also made an effort to include all community members in their performance-healing activities. Agus’s *hikayat* and *teka-teki* performances were open to everyone and often attracted diverse participants. After one *hikayat* show, Agus recalled, “when we got to one village there were a lot of villagers who could perform *hikayat*; there were already a lot waiting their turn. [They called] “Me, me, me, me,” like that. It was very effective.”<sup>389</sup> The *teka-teki* shows were also open to men, women, and children. According to Agus, women were the most enthusiastic participants: “On average it was the women who tried to answer. All the women knew the answer compared to the men. Women would climb up on stage to answer, wherever [we were].”<sup>390</sup> Uki has also attempted to reach a diverse audience. Though his work with the UNESCO RAT program was specifically directed towards children tsunami survivors, Pak Uki’s efforts to promote Acehese arts abroad have helped to educate young and old, Indonesian and non-Indonesian, about Acehese performance. In this way, Uki’s efforts to share Acehese performance have heightened individuals’ understanding of Aceh and may have encouraged them to lend aid for tsunami survivors or to support Aceh’s arts practices. Agus Nur Amal’s television and film performances, Rafly’s participation in peace-building events, and Sarjev’s organization of Acehese arts festivals outside of Aceh have also done

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<sup>388</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 20, 2010. Indonesian: “*Nilai-nilai dalam tradisi itu yang menjadi harapan hidup, begitu. Walaupun, selama konflik, orang hidup dengan sangat, sangat chaos, pikirannya kacau, pikiran yang penuh ketakutan, begitu. Satu-satunya harapan, ya, tradisi itu kembali.*”

<sup>389</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 8, 2010. Indonesian: “*Ketika saya masuk ke satu kampung...orang-orang kampungnya yang bisa berhikayat sudah banyak yang menunggu, begitu. Sudah banyak yang menunggu gilirannya. ‘Saya, saya, saya, saya,’ begitu. Nah itu sangat efektif.*”

<sup>390</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: “*Nah itu Ibu-Ibu yang rata-rata ikut menjawab. Semua Ibu-Ibu tahu jawaban yang dibandingkan orang laki-laki. Ibu-Ibu akan naik panggung untuk menjawab, di manapun itu.*”

much to represent Aceh as a region of rich cultural traditions, and to minimize its associations with violence and disaster.

In addition to addressing Acehnese individuals' immediate trauma, the artists also worked to familiarize Acehnese individuals with their cultural traditions so that they might turn to this medium in the future as an outlet for emotional expression. But while popular artists such as Uki, Agus, and Rafly have certainly made a positive impression on Acehnese individuals, it is unclear whether they have inspired community members to pursue a long-term relationship with the arts. For example, unless the children that Uki worked with have opportunities to attend regular rehearsals or performances in Aceh, it is unlikely that they will continue to develop their skills in dance and music. In regards to *hikayat*, Agus's appearances on television and his frequent trips to Aceh may succeed in attracting interested youth to this performance form. But Agus admits that interest in *hikayat* is dwindling. For those who wish to pursue *hikayat* performance as a career, it is recommended that they produce a video recording that can be distributed all over Aceh. This can be an expensive and time-consuming process, and ultimately, Agus finds, only those people who are already interested in *hikayat* will buy the recording.

It is also unclear whether the local artists were successful in their attempts to include all members of a given community in their performances. As with the structured dance rehearsals given by international and local organizations, there may be existing factors that prevent Acehnese women and girls from fully participating. For example, Uki agreed that there are fewer female Acehnese artists after the tsunami and that only a handful of women were involved in the RAT program compared to men. Agus also admitted that *hikayat* performance tends to be dominated by men. Though he had several performances given by female *hikayat* performers, Agus claimed that these women were something of an anomaly. Agus explained, "The women

audience members were the ones who were the most excited to see their neighbors performing *hikayat*. For example, women seeing men performing *hikayat*, that's common. But if they see their female neighbor performing *hikayat*, that [makes them] really happy to clap their hands."<sup>391</sup> Not only were female *hikayat* performers a rarity, but they were also subject to social criticism. Cut Poh, a woman whose performance Agus found remarkable, was considered to be crazy by her neighbors. Agus notes, "People in the village said that she was crazy...She was...neurotic or schizophrenic, something like that. This was what the villagers said...In my opinion she was not crazy, but she already had too much of a burden in her thoughts, in her heart, that needed to be expressed. So she came to TV Eng-Ong, she told her whole story—and when she was done she felt satisfied. Thus, I think she really just needed to express her feelings...She just wanted to tell someone her problems."<sup>392</sup>

The fact that most *hikayat* performers are men and the few female performers are considered "crazy" by their communities sheds light on another of Agus's observations regarding female *hikayat* performers: their lack of self-confidence. Agus commented, "As for those who perform *hikayat*, indeed they are all men. Because men have the courage to perform in public. But actually women have also memorized many *hikayat*; like I already mentioned, there's Cut Poh, Cut Poh Nagan, Cut Poh Meulaboh, Umami... There are a lot of women who can perform *hikayat*, but they are too shy to perform in public...I mean, it's not forbidden for women to perform *hikayat*... Women can also perform *hikayat*. But as far as I know, indeed there really

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: "Ibu-Ibu penonton juga paling suka kalau melihat tetangganya berhikayat, begitu. Misalnya orang perempuan melihat orang laki yang berhikayat, itu biasa saja. Tetapi kalau lihat tetangga yang perempuan berhikayat itu paling senang tepuk-tepuk tangan."

<sup>392</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 20, 2010. Indonesian: "Dia dibilang orang kampung itu, dia sudah gila...Dia...neurotik atau skizofrenia, begitu. Dikatakan oleh orang kampung...Menurut saya dia tidak gila, tapi sudah terlalu, banyak beban dalam pikirannya, dalam hatinya, yang perlu diungkapkan. Nah dia masuk ke TV Eng-Ong, dia ceritai semua, dia—habis itu dia merasa puas, jadi saya kira memang kebutuhan dia untuk mengekspresikan perasaannya...mau membicarakan kepada siapa, masalahnya dia."

aren't women who perform in public."<sup>393</sup> In this sense, although women might have been Agus's most enthusiastic audience members, they were far less enthusiastic to perform their own stories on stage.<sup>394</sup>

As with the performance activities provided by international and local NGOs, there is nothing inherent within *hikayat* performances that excludes women. In fact, Agus noted that *hikayat* may be a particularly important outlet for Acehese women because, in the performances he has seen, women are better at improvising and their stories tend to be more imaginative than those of men. Moreover, Agus claims that women have the freedom to criticize men in *hikayat*, whereas men would not criticize women.<sup>395</sup> Regardless of whether Acehese women are naturally "better" *hikayat* performers, the most important point to consider is whether Acehese women and men have an equal opportunity to utilize this medium for their own purposes. As Agus's comments indicate, Acehese women are clearly able to perform *hikayat*. And as Aceh's centuries-old performance traditions have indicated, Acehese women are just as capable dancers and musicians as men. But with a thirty year-long conflict, a tsunami, and conservative religious leaders sending the message that it is unsafe or unacceptable for Acehese women share their stories in public, it is no wonder that Acehese women may feel reluctant to engage in performance activities or to pursue a long-term relationship with Acehese arts. In this way, the

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: "*Kalau yang berhikayat memang semua laki-laki, begitu, ya? Karena laki-laki yang berani tampil di depan publik. Tapi sebetulnya orang perempuan juga menghafal banyak hikayat, seperti yang saya pernah bilang ada Cut Poh, Cut Poh Nagan, Cut Poh Meulaboh, Umami... Banyak perempuan yang bisa berhikayat, tapi mereka malu tampil di depan masyarakat... Tidak ada larangan untuk perempuan berhikayat, tidak ada larangan, begitu. Perempuan juga boleh berhikayat. Tapi sepengetahuan saya, memang tidak ada perempuan yang tampil di depan publik.*"

<sup>394</sup> Agus Nur Amal uses the term "*malu*" to describe Acehese women's attitudes towards performing in public. Although I have translated this word as "shy," *malu* has a much more complex meaning and also translates as "timid," "ashamed," "embarrassed," or "unconfident." Each of these translations, however, suggests that Acehese women are reluctant to perform, or are uncomfortable performing in public.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

local artists' efforts may not have been enough to counteract a societal environment that restricts Acehese women's performance activities.

## CONCLUSION

Efforts to use Acehese dance, music, and theater practices for trauma recovery within Acehese communities took a variety of forms and were met with varying degrees of success. As my analysis suggests, Acehese performance can bring community members together in a safe space, strengthen individuals' sense of cultural identity, and facilitate the expression of grievances, all of which are important for dealing with feelings of trauma. In addition, incorporating the arts in healing efforts has helped to spread awareness about and build support for Acehese performance, which suffered as a result of the conflict and the tsunami.

Despite these positive outcomes, however, the degree to which the performance-healing activities were able to sustain individuals' relationship with the arts and to address individual experiences of trauma remains questionable. Without providing resources for Acehese to continue arts performance, it is unlikely that Acehese community members—many of whom are in the midst of rebuilding their economic and social lives—will devote the time and energy necessary for developing their relationship with the arts. This may be especially true for Acehese girls and women. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the conflict, the tsunami, and conservative religious attitudes have conveyed the message that Acehese girls and women are unwelcome and unsafe within public space, as they are subject to violence, disaster, or harassment. Traditions such as *merantau* and matrifocality further emphasize women's connections to the domestic realm and may also contribute to the belief that performance is a predominantly male activity. These factors, I argue, are directly connected to Agus Nur Amal's observations of women's participation in performance-healing activities: women are either too

“timid” to participate, or they are considered to be “crazy” for expressing themselves in public. In this way, even if performance *is* an effective healing tool for Acehese girls and women, societal attitudes and women’s internalized sense of doubt about public performance may prevent them from taking full advantage of what performance has to offer, either as a form of recreation or a tool for resisting trauma.

Of course, this analysis is restricted to Acehese whose lives have been transformed by the conflict, the tsunami, and the implementation of *syariah* law. In other words, this analysis is limited to communities of Acehese living in Aceh. In the next chapter, I will explore how Acehese interact with their performing arts practices in Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Transported Traditions**

In the previous chapter I argued that the conflict, the tsunami, and the aftermath of these events produced a particular socio-political environment in Aceh that significantly influenced the ways in which Acehnese experience and understand trauma, their methods for dealing with or “resisting” trauma, and their relationship to their performance traditions. How, then, might Acehnese living outside of Aceh make sense of or attempt to address their traumatic experiences? How do Acehnese interact with their performance traditions within a different socio-political environment?

This chapter focuses on the Acehnese community in Jakarta. Outside of Aceh, Jakarta hosts the largest community of Acehnese in Indonesia. Acehnese have a history of migrating to Jakarta in search of better economic and educational opportunities and have sought refuge in Jakarta during periods of upheaval (such as the Dutch-Aceh War and the Cumbok War). In addition, Jakarta is one of the few cities in Indonesia where Acehnese dance is taught in both informal and formal (i.e., institutional) settings. There are also numerous Acehnese artists who now live and work in Jakarta. By focusing on Jakarta, I draw attention to the “everyday” traumas that Acehnese experience in the diaspora, rather than focusing on conflict- or tsunami-related traumas alone. I also give a more nuanced view of how Acehnese interact with their performance traditions outside of Aceh.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the Acehnese community in Jakarta, identifying past waves of migration as well as the make-up of present-day communities, the challenges Acehnese face outside of Aceh, and the tactics they use to overcome these challenges. Next, I offer a detailed account of the Acehnese arts scene in Jakarta. This section investigates who is involved in the performances, when and where these performances take place, and what

significance these performances hold for both the Acehnese and non-Acehnese individuals who participate in them. I also examine how Acehnese performance traditions have been transformed in Jakarta, paying attention not only to the perspective of older Acehnese artists, but also the possibilities that these transformations hold for Acehnese youth and non-Acehnese performers. In the final section, I return to the question of gender and trauma resistance, investigating how the diasporic location of Jakarta influences performance opportunities for Acehnese women and men.

Before I continue, I would like to make a note about my use of the term “diaspora,” which in recent years has come to refer to forced migration, exile, and displacement, as well as “situations that are not associated with forced dispersals or a desire to return.”<sup>396</sup> Diaspora may also be defined by “its ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations,” even if such locations are within the same country, thus forming an “internal diaspora.”<sup>397</sup> I have chosen to identify Acehnese who have migrated to Jakarta as belonging to a “diaspora” community for several reasons. First, although Acehnese who relocate to Jakarta are not technically speaking foreigners, my research shows that many of them have experienced feelings that are characteristic of diasporic communities, including isolation, “culture shock,” and homesickness. In addition, Acehnese in Jakarta have varying relationships to the “homeland.” While some have permanently settled in Jakarta, others travel back and forth between the two regions several times a year. Still others have relocated primarily to pursue higher education, but are unsure about whether or not they will return to Aceh once they have obtained their degrees. As a result of these diverse relationships that Acehnese have with their “home” and “host” communities, I follow Antje Missbach in using the term “diasporans” to refer to Acehnese who have relocated.

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<sup>396</sup> Vijay Agnew, ed., *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>397</sup> Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity*, 4.

For Missbach, the term diasporan “pays attention to the variety and complexity of reasons why Acehnese left Aceh. Rather than defining people according to the cause of departure or length of stay overseas, it places the emphasis on their adjustment while in the host land and in particular on the interrelations between them as coethnics.”<sup>398</sup> The term “diasporan” also recognizes the efforts Acehnese communities have made in Jakarta to “preserve their distinctiveness (language, traditions and customs)... instead of acculturating to the host country’s ‘standards’ (which is of course, even if strongly desired, often easier said than done).”<sup>399</sup> As I will explain in greater detail, Acehnese diasporans in Jakarta have used their cultural practices to both maintain a sense of distinctiveness and to create a sense of belonging within Jakarta.

#### **ACEHNESE IN JAKARTA: THEN AND NOW**

What brings Acehnese to Jakarta today, and what brought them there in the past? How do Acehnese maintain a sense of community in Jakarta, if they do at all? What obstacles do they face while living outside of Aceh? The following section addresses these questions by offering historical background on Acehnese migration to the nation’s capital, an overview of the present-day demographic, the types of difficulties Acehnese face while living in Jakarta, and their methods for dealing with these difficulties.

#### **Waves of Migration**

At the time that I began researching the Acehnese community in Jakarta (April 2010), I discovered an Acehnese cultural center, several Acehnese restaurants and cafes, and a few hundred Acehnese students populating Jakarta’s various universities. Today, there are approximately eight hundred Acehnese living in Jakarta.<sup>400</sup> However, Acehnese have been

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<sup>398</sup> Antje Missbach, “Long-distance Politics in Transition: Aceh’s Diaspora During and After the Homeland Conflict (1976-2009)” (PhD diss., The Australian National University, Canberra, 2009), 37.

<sup>399</sup> Missbach, “Long-distance Politics in Transition,” 38.

<sup>400</sup> Iwan Amir, email message to author, September 25, 2009.

traveling to and sometimes settling permanently in Jakarta since at least the colonial period. Seeking higher education was one of the primary motivations behind Acehnese relocation. When Dutch colonizers introduced standardized education to Indonesia in the early 1900s, Jakarta—then Batavia—became the center of higher learning, drawing the brightest and the wealthiest from all over the Netherlands Indies. For Benedict Anderson, it was this kind of educational journey that enabled individuals from varied ethnic backgrounds to see themselves as brothers who belonged to a single community. Anderson explains, “in each constricted journey he found bilingual traveling companions with whom he came to feel a growing communality. In his journey he understood rather quickly that his point of origin—conceived either ethnically, linguistically, or geographically—was of small significance. At most it started him on this pilgrimage rather than that...Out of this pattern came that subtle, half-concealed transformation, step by step, of the colonial-state into the national-state.”<sup>401</sup>

Though traveling to Jakarta may have given Acehnese a greater sense of a national identity—a sense that in addition to being Acehnese, they were also Indonesian—leaving Aceh in search of better educational or work opportunities has long been viewed as an integral part of Acehnese (male) identity through the practice of *merantau*. As I discussed in Chapter 2, *merantau*, has been described as “leaving home for a certain amount of time to gather experience, learn new skills and make one’s fortune,”<sup>402</sup> and is strongly associated with the male gender. This may explain some of the responses I received from older Acehnese men when I asked about the kinds of challenges Acehnese face in Jakarta. The men informed me that Acehnese have been traveling to cities within and outside of Indonesia for centuries because of the tradition of *merantau*, and as a result they could “easily adapt” to new areas and

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<sup>401</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Press, 2006), 114-15.

<sup>402</sup> Missbach, “Long-distance Politics in Transition,” 36.

circumstances. Of course, this answer glosses over the individual difficulties that Acehnese, particularly women, face in their relocation to Jakarta—a topic I will address in the next section.

In addition to the Dutch educational system, which positioned Jakarta as the center of higher learning, and the tradition of *merantau*, which encourages Acehnese men to travel, Acehnese have also relocated to Jakarta in order to escape hardships within Aceh. For example, after the Dutch defeated the Acehnese Sultanate in 1903, some Acehnese, particularly the elite, went into exile in near-by Muslim countries or settled in larger cities in Indonesia. The bloody Cumbok War (1945-46) also inspired a surge of migration to Jakarta and other cities, especially among Aceh's *uleebalang* (territorial chiefs), who were attacked by the local *ulama* (religious leaders). According to Iwan Amir, “those who stayed were slaughtered, those who fled settled in other places including Jakarta, where their descendants still live there today with little desire to return to their homeland.”<sup>403</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, Acehnese were again motivated to seek better jobs and opportunities outside of Aceh as oil companies infiltrated the region, exploited the land, and filled employment positions with non-Acehnese. As a result, many traveled to Jakarta. Finally, the intense fighting that ensued towards the end of the GAM conflict caused many Acehnese to try to escape the violence and find work outside of Aceh. According to Missbach, whose research follows the Acehnese diaspora in Malaysia, “the peak of out-migration occurred during the most severe times of the Aceh conflict, especially in the early 1990s and after the declaration of martial law in Aceh in 2003 which caused many Acehnese to become either internally displaced people or refugees.”<sup>404</sup> As a result of colonial battles, internal conflicts, and the exploitation of Acehnese resources, the twentieth century has seen waves of Acehnese migration, with many Acehnese relocating to Jakarta.

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<sup>403</sup> Iwan Amir, email message to author, September 25, 2009.

<sup>404</sup> Missbach, “Long-distance Politics in Transition,” 37.

## Demographic

Acehnese diasporans in Jakarta today are mostly government officials, businessmen, and students, with students forming the largest group. Though I was able to speak with some Acehnese government officials, I spent most of my time talking to Acehnese students, who are more involved with cultural and arts activities than other Acehnese diasporans. Acehnese students in Jakarta are also known for their political activity, particularly during the conflict when they organized protests to oppose the Indonesian Army's occupation of Aceh. For example, after SIRA (*Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh*), or "Aceh Referendum Information Center," was formed in Banda Aceh in 1999, Acehnese "expatriates" in Jakarta and elsewhere in Indonesia formed their own local branches in order to organize political demonstrations.<sup>405</sup> The Organization of Acehnese Students and Youth in Jakarta (*Ikatan Mahasiswa dan Pemuda Aceh-Jakarta*, or IMAPA) was also formed in the late 1990s in response to the state violence and human rights abuses taking place in Aceh.<sup>406</sup>

Today, seeking educational opportunities in Jakarta is a primary motivation for Acehnese to travel to Jakarta. Most Acehnese studying in Jakarta claim that educational standards and facilities are more advanced in the nation's capital. For Debra Yatim, an Acehnese women's activist and scholar, this was not always the case. Debra notes, "in the past, Acehnese society was very respected for their higher education...In the 1940s...I saw Acehnese men who were cosmopolitan, suave and debonaire. They smoked, they drank, they played roulette. Any chance they had they went to Las Vegas; they were all rich. The Acehnese in Jakarta were worldly, wise."<sup>407</sup> Today, however, Acehnese are in fierce competition with other Indonesian students to

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<sup>405</sup> Edward Aspinall, "Violence and Identity Formation in Aceh under Indonesian Rule," in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 167.

<sup>406</sup> Nadia, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 19, 2010

<sup>407</sup> Debra Yatim, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 12, 2010.

get an education in Jakarta, which they know will land them better jobs. An Acehnese student I interviewed in Yogyakarta responded, “in my personal opinion, education in Aceh is not that good, and I wanted to broaden my understanding by going outside of Aceh.”<sup>408</sup> Other students I talked to in Jakarta agreed that leaving Aceh gave them an opportunity to broaden their worldview by interacting with the diverse cultures that can be found in such a cosmopolitan city. Uty remarked, “In terms of education, in Jakarta it’s more respected, the facilities are better...It’s also the capital of Indonesia. There are definitely a lot of different kinds of people here in Jakarta.”<sup>409</sup>

Unfortunately, studying outside of Aceh is not always feasible. For many Acehnese, the cost of traveling to and living in Jakarta is more than their families can afford. Most of the Acehnese students I spoke with had gotten full scholarships to the universities they were attending, and admitted that without the scholarship they would not have been able to study outside of Aceh. In addition to this financial barrier, Acehnese girls are at a further disadvantage. Winny, a female Acehnese student living in Yogyakarta, explained, “for an Acehnese who wants to travel alone, a female, she cannot go abroad to school. She can’t go outside of Aceh. She has to stay in Aceh. This was my friends’ experience... Why can’t they just leave Aceh? Certainly, if they leave Aceh, their knowledge will expand... But for my friends, they won’t receive this [knowledge] outside of Aceh because according to their parents, it’s not good for their kids to go far from their parents... If it’s guys, then they can! [They can go] as far as they want, as far as they want to go to school, wherever they want... But in

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<sup>408</sup> Winny, interview with author, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Kalau menurut saya pribadi, pendidikan di Aceh itu agak kurang, jadi saya ingin memperluaskan pengetahuan itu dengan pergi ke luar Aceh.*”

<sup>409</sup> Uty, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 4, 2010. Indonesian: “*Kalau di segi pendidikan, di Jakarta itu jauh lebih madahi. Lebih, apa ya, lebih baguslah. Dari fasilitas... juga Ibukota Indonesia, jadi, pasti, beraneka ragam orang, banyak aneka ragam jenis, pasti ada di sini.*”

Acehnese culture, it's rare for girls to go far from their parents."<sup>410</sup> Another student I talked to, an Acehnese male who has been living in Jakarta for several years after graduating from college, confirmed that Acehnese families are reluctant to send their daughters abroad, whereas sons are less of a concern. For example, when I asked Edy what his parents thought of his decision to move to Jakarta, he replied, "I can't really say, because that is my choice. That is my destiny, where I want to go to school... They don't have to worry because I'm a guy. Maybe if I were a girl, they'd worry a little because it's easier for girls to be bad, like... uncontrolled, using drugs."<sup>411</sup> Edy's comments suggest that Acehnese parents believe their sons are more capable than their daughters of taking care of themselves and staying out of trouble; as a result, parents are more willing to send their sons to study abroad.

As I have already discussed, the conflict, the tsunami, and the implementation of *syariah* law in Aceh restricted women's mobility and may have emphasized the notion that Acehnese women's responsibilities are linked to their homes and families. In addition, the centuries-old practice of *merantau* has designated travel as a traditionally male activity. These factors, combined with Winny's and Edy's comments, suggest that there are far more Acehnese men than women living in Jakarta today. According to Antje Missbach, men make up the majority of Acehnese diasporans in Malaysia, Scandinavia, Australia and the United States. Missbach writes:

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<sup>410</sup> Winny, interview with author, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: "*Misalnya, kalau memang dia orang Aceh yang bersendir, kalau perempuan itu ngak boleh ke luar, ke sekolahnya, ngak boleh keluar dari Aceh. Dan harus tetap di Aceh saja. Itu pengalaman teman-temanku... Kenapa ngak keluar Aceh aja? Pastinya, kalau luar dari Aceh itu, ilmu akan bertambah... Tapi pengalaman teman aku itu, itu ngak dikasih keluar Aceh karena menurut orang-tuanya anak keluar itu tidak bagus untuk jauh-jauh dari orang-tua. Mereka seperti itu. Dan kalau anak laki-laki itu boleh! Sejauh apapun, sejauh apapun dia sekolah, mau ke manapun... Tapi kebanyakan kultur di Aceh begitu: anak perempuannya jarang yang boleh ke—jauh-jauh dari orang-tuanya.*"

<sup>411</sup> Edy, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 5, 2010. Indonesian: "*Tidak bisa bilang because that is my choice. That is my destiny, where I want to go to school... Mungkin mereka tidak khawatir, karena saya lelaki. Mungkin kalau cewek, sangat, sedikit khawatir. Because cewek easy untuk going to be bad... Like, uncontrol, seperti using drugs.*"



I found it generally very difficult to find women's voices. This was not only because there were more men than women in the diaspora, but also because women were often less visible in public life. Unmarried Acehnese women were often employed in factories, which provided accommodation near the factory compound. Married women occupied private spheres. They did not frequent coffee shops or restaurants, unless they worked there as waitresses or cooks. Especially if they lacked legal papers, women avoided public places because detention was particularly hazardous for them. When I met Acehnese women in public, for example, in shops or at community celebrations, they were mostly accompanied by men, who then answered my questions even if I directed them to the women. In private homes I came across similar paternalistic attitudes.<sup>412</sup>

Though I did not have difficulty meeting with Acehnese women in Jakarta, it became obvious that the attitudes and expectations held by their families in Aceh had a significant influence on their experiences in Jakarta, and, as I will discuss later, also affected the ways in which they interacted with their performance traditions.

### **Challenges**

Despite the notion that Acehnese can “easily adapt” to new environments, Acehnese living in Jakarta encounter a variety of challenges. I would like to suggest that these kinds of difficulties—including financial worries, homesickness, and discrimination—may, in some instances and for some individuals, constitute an “everyday” experience of trauma. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, although these kinds of challenges may not appear to “measure up” to trauma resulting from the conflict or the tsunami, these less visible experiences of “everyday

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<sup>412</sup> Missbach, “Long-distance Politics in Transition,” 58-9.

emotional distress” or “feeling bad”<sup>413</sup> are just as important to recognize and to decipher as “catastrophic,” visible, or “claimed” traumas. Unfortunately, research on trauma in conflict- and disaster-affected communities is often limited to short-term analyses and does not address how “catastrophic” and “everyday” experiences of trauma are linked.

There are several different challenges that Acehnese face while living in Jakarta. First, although finances are among the most important factors determining whether Acehnese youth will travel to Jakarta, finances are also a concern for Acehnese students who are living abroad. When asked what difficulties the Acehnese community in Jakarta faces, Edy answered, “First, definitely economic [difficulties] because of going to school here; even if there are scholarships [they are] difficult to get. Also, my parents can’t really support me or pay my living expenses. So we have to take another job so we can live better.”<sup>414</sup> Other students I met explained that they had not returned to Aceh for over four years because they couldn’t afford it. Though some students were able to return to Aceh during school breaks, many spent this time working. Even after graduating, all of the Acehnese students I spoke with planned to continue their education abroad, getting their Master’s degrees or finding work in Jakarta or other cities. Pursuing degrees in information technology or other areas of computer science, they all seemed aware that their primary purpose in Jakarta was to excel in their studies, which would eventually land them well-paying jobs and enable them to send support to their families back home. Unfortunately, this is goal is shared by thousands of other Indonesian students with whom Acehnese found themselves in competition. Cut Farah explained, “as for the challenges that Acehnese in Jakarta face, it’s rather difficult to compete with people who are originally from Jakarta in regards to

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<sup>413</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>414</sup> Edy, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 5, 2010. Indonesian: “*First, pasti ekonomi, ya? Because, susah kalau, I’m going to school here, kalau ada beasiswa, susah. Terus, orang tua juga kurang mampu untuk support. For the hidup, ya? Jadi, we need to take another job untuk bisa hidup lebih baik.*”

education, because in Jakarta their education is more advanced.”<sup>415</sup> In this sense, even those students who are financially able to study in Jakarta are not guaranteed a job. Acehnese students in the diaspora thus face a great deal of pressure to do well in their studies and meet their families’ expectations.

Because so many students were unable to travel back and forth between Aceh and Jakarta, homesickness was another hardship they experienced while abroad. Though they knew that Jakarta offered better educational and work opportunities than Aceh, most of the students I spoke with found it difficult to adapt to Jakarta’s fast-paced lifestyle and crowded environment. Cut Farah told me, “as for the lifestyle, as for living here, I’m not that happy. I’m not that happy with it because it’s too dense, too crowded, there’s too much pollution. It’s better in Aceh.”<sup>416</sup> Some students missed specific aspects of their lives in Aceh, ranging from Acehnese cooking to surfing on Aceh’s beaches. Others experienced culture shock upon arriving in Jakarta. Uty explained, “first, if you come to Jakarta, Jakarta is a big city. It’s glamorous, you know? And compared to Aceh, Jakarta is far more open. Just looking at clothes alone, for example, in Aceh it’s not permitted to wear any kind of tank top... [There’s also] the fast-paced life because there are all kinds of night clubs. That’s a difference between Aceh and Jakarta.”<sup>417</sup> In addition to missing friends and family and having to adapt to a different lifestyle in Jakarta, Acehnese students also confronted a degree of independence that they were not accustomed to. Cut Farah

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<sup>415</sup> Cut Farah, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Yang dihadapi masyarakat Aceh di Jakarta mungkin, la—agak sedikit sulit bersaing sama orang-orang yang asli dari Jakarta, itu dalam bidang pendidikan. Soalnya kan kalau di Jakarta pendidikannya lebih maju, gitu.*”

<sup>416</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: “*Kalau buat hidup, buat tinggal di sini, kurang senang. Kurang senang karena mungkin terlalu padat, terlalu ramai, terlalu banyak polusi. Lebih enak di Aceh.*”

<sup>417</sup> Uty, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 4, 2010. Indonesian: “*Pertama, kalau datang ke Jakarta, Jakarta kota besar. Glamor, you know? Bebas. Karena, kalau dibandingkan dengan Aceh, Jakarta jauh lebih bebas. Bisa dilihat dari segi pakaian aja, segi pakaian, kalau misalnya di Aceh kan, gak boleh, ya? Pakaian tank-top semacam-macam... Terus, kehidupan kehura-hura, karena discoteque segala macam, kan? Itu pasti ada, tapi kalau di Aceh kan, itu perbedaan Aceh sama Jakarta mungkin itu.*”

noted, “The challenges [I face] are living alone and having to be more self-sufficient. Because in Aceh everything is already taken care of. But here you have to do everything yourself.”<sup>418</sup>

Homesickness, culture shock, and having to fend for oneself are challenges that any college student might experience when traveling away from home for the first time. However, Acehnese also encountered obstacles that other diasporans may not have faced. For example, a few Acehnese I spoke with believed that the Acehnese community in Jakarta was not unified. Many Acehnese are scattered throughout Jakarta, with some living more than an hour outside the city center in areas like Tangerang. Jakarta traffic is notoriously bad, and it can be difficult for individuals who live in these areas to attend Acehnese events. Pak Uki, an Acehnese dance and music instructor at Jakarta’s Arts Institute commented, “from what I’ve seen, trying to gather the Acehnese society in Jakarta to study specifically Acehnese dance or Acehnese culture is hard because they live far apart from each other. Except for certain days, big days like *Lebaran*, or another kind of holiday.”<sup>419</sup> In addition, the conflict and the tsunami may have prevented Acehnese from readily participating in Acehnese cultural events taking place in Jakarta. Missbach explains, “it has to be acknowledged that for some Acehnese their traumatic experiences caused a retreat from Acehnese circles.”<sup>420</sup> In some cases, Acehnese may have an interest in attending cultural events, but had no way to find out about them. An Acehnese student in Yogyakarta noted, “Maybe there’s not enough information about meeting up with

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<sup>418</sup> Cut Farah, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Tantangan yang bisa hidup sendiri, lebih mandiri. Karena, kalau di sana selalu ada yang disediakan. Kalau di sini semua-semuanya sendiri.*”

<sup>419</sup> Pak Uki, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 15, 2010. “*Kalau saya melihat, mengumpulkan masyarakat Aceh di Jakarta ini untuk belajar khusus tari Aceh atau pun budaya Aceh yang lain, sulitnya itu karena mereka tinggal berjauhan. Kecuali pada hari-hari tertentu, hari besar, apa, hari lebaran, atau hari besar apa.*”

<sup>420</sup> Missbach, “Long-distance Politics in Transition,” 143.

Acehnese here, or maybe...they don't know if this is a place where Acehnese kids can meet.”<sup>421</sup>

To get around these hurdles, Acehnese frequently sought advice from friends and relatives who had already traveled to Jakarta. They also used social networking websites, such as Facebook, to find an Acehnese community outside of Aceh.

Another challenge that Acehnese may have had to combat while living in Jakarta is discrimination. Though most of the Acehnese I interviewed claimed that this was not a problem for them, they were all aware of the stereotypes that other Indonesians have of Acehnese. For example, many individuals in Jakarta continue to think of Aceh as a site of violence, despite the fact that the GAM conflict came to halt in early 2005. Several taxi drivers I talked to informed me that they had no desire to ever visit Aceh because of “GAM” or “*kekerasaan*” (violence).<sup>422</sup>

Another popular stereotype of Acehnese is that they smoke a lot of marijuana. In several different contexts, Jakartans I spoke with told me that Acehnese “smoke *ganja* all the time,” and as a result are “*malas*” (lazy).<sup>423</sup> When asked whether he faced any discrimination from Jakartans, Edy responded, “Maybe a little bit, yes, there is. Such as drugs, definitely marijuana. There's definitely discrimination. But not all Acehnese use drugs!”<sup>424</sup>

Finally, Acehnese women living in Jakarta have faced several challenges of their own. For example, the fact that Acehnese society requires all Muslim women to wear a *jilbab* (headscarf) and forbids them from wearing “tight” or “revealing” clothing—standards that are determined by the almost all-male religious police—is a sharp distinction from fashion norms in

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<sup>421</sup> Winny, interview with author, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Mungkin...kurang infonya akan ada pertemuan orang Aceh di sini, atau mungkin...mereka ngak tahu kalau di sini itu tempat, tempat anak Aceh berkumpul atau apa.*”

<sup>422</sup> These were the replies of taxi drivers I spoke with on April 8, 2010, April 15, 2010 and April 20, 2010.

<sup>423</sup> University professors in Jakarta told me this on April 8, 2010. A taxi driver also shared this opinion on April 15, 2010.

<sup>424</sup> Edy, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 5, 2010. Indonesian: “*Sedikit mungkin ada, ya. Seperti, pasti, seperti drugs, marijuana...Pasti ada diskriminasi. Karena, tidak semua orang Aceh pakai drugs!*”

Jakarta, where Indonesians sport a variety of styles. This may have caused Acehnese females to feel a greater sense of “culture shock” than males. In addition, a few Acehnese girls I spoke with claimed that their decision to wear their *jilbab* in Jakarta made them stand out as Acehnese and could become a source of discrimination. When I asked Uty if there were specific challenges she faced in Jakarta as an Acehnese female, she answered, “Each time I looked for a job there was definitely a problem with my *jilbab*. My *jilbab* was a problem from the very beginning. I once applied for a job and even though he accepted me, I had to remove my *jilbab*. Since we’re from Aceh, it’s not possible for us to remove our *jilbab*. But it’s just a job, and there weren’t any other jobs, so I thought, okay, I’ll just remove it.”<sup>425</sup> Though there are many other Indonesian women who wear the *jilbab* in Jakarta, Uty, along with some of the other girls I interviewed, felt that this article of clothing identified her as Acehnese, and that even outside of Aceh it was her responsibility to follow Aceh’s strict dress codes. Other girls, however, were more than willing to take advantage of the leniency Jakarta’s fashion environment permitted. When I met with Sari, an Acehnese girl who had been living in Jakarta no more than a year, she showed up in short shorts and a stylish jacket, with her long black hair flowing freely down her back. She also brought her Acehnese boyfriend, who didn’t seem to mind that Sari’s bare legs and uncovered hair were available for all to see.

### **Tactics**

As a means of coping with the various challenges of living in Jakarta, Acehnese diasporans have developed several tactics, or what Michel de Certeau refers to as the “art of the

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<sup>425</sup> Uty, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 4, 2010. Indonesian: “Kalau setiap aku dicari kerja, pasti masalahnya *jilbab*. *Jilbab* masalah awal. Jadi aku pernah lamar kerja, tapi dia bilang, dia terima tapi harus lepas *jilbab*. Tapi karena kita dari Aceh, ngak mungkin kan, kita lepas *jilbab*. Cuman itu kerjaan, karena ngak ada kerjaan yang lain, jadi aku pikir, ya udah, lepaskan saja.”

weak.”<sup>426</sup> I use the term “tactics” in this context because Acehnese in Jakarta are minorities living in an unfamiliar space dealing with circumstances that are out of their control. As I discussed in Chapter 3, and as I will discuss further in Chapter 5, I also find this term particularly useful for describing the significance of Acehnese performance for trauma survivors and Acehnese women in needs of an alternative outlet for traumatic expression.

In order to deal with financial hardships as well as to combat feelings of loneliness and homesickness, Acehnese seek opportunities to connect with other Acehnese in Jakarta and participate in Acehnese-related events. Among the most important sites for community-building in Jakarta is Acehnese student housing. The Acehnese students I met often lived in groups of eight, twelve, or more in dorms or other shared housing facilities. Living together not only helped to ease their financial burdens, but it also functioned as a space where they could cook and eat Acehnese food together and discuss shared experiences. One of the largest housing facilities for Acehnese students is Taman Iskandar Muda. This dorm is also a center of Acehnese arts in Jakarta, holding Acehnese dance and music rehearsals as well as performances. However, Taman Iskandar Muda is an all-male dorm, and no one I asked knew where the all-female equivalent of Taman Iskandar Muda was, or if such a place even existed.

Living together and going to school together also enabled Acehnese students to become friends with individuals from different areas of Aceh whom they may never have met otherwise. Missbach observes, “one characteristic of a diaspora is that people build bonds with their co-ethnics beyond narrow kinship and local networks.”<sup>427</sup> Despite missing his friends from his hometown, Edy confessed that the Acehnese friends he made at Taman Iskandar Muda were instrumental in helping him overcome financial and other challenges he encountered. Edy told

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<sup>426</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 37.

<sup>427</sup> Missbach, “Long-distance Politics in Transition,” 89.

me, “I think I’m lucky because I can stay here and...not pay too much. And [I can be] together with my friends, who are all Acehnese, so I don’t need to worry. If I cannot eat, then my friend will help me. And if I have something, then I will help my friend.”<sup>428</sup> Cut Farah also found that the friends she made in Jakarta were an important source of comfort and advice. She responded, “I usually ask for my friends’ opinions, and from their opinions I can overcome my challenges.”<sup>429</sup>

In addition to shared living spaces, the Acehnese restaurants and coffee houses in Jakarta also provided Acehnese diasporans an opportunity to meet with fellow Acehnese and reconnect with their culture. Although meeting at a coffee house is not a particularly unusual activity, especially for Indonesians, it may have particular significance for Acehnese. During the conflict, coffee houses were among the few public spaces Acehnese could gather without fear. Hotli Simanjuntak explains, “during the period of conflict in Aceh in the 1980s and 1990s, coffee shops served as a neutral zone for all circles to meet in a relaxed way...When the conflict was intense, nearly all residents, especially men, were suspected by the military of joining GAM and hiding in village homes. Male family members frequented coffee shops to avoid being suspected by soldiers, who were hunting GAM followers in their villages.”<sup>430</sup> Today, coffee houses continue to be an important place for Acehnese to hear the news, to have political discussions, to study, or to simply hang out with friends. Members of the arts group Taloe informed me that the idea for their organization originated in the Solong café, Banda Aceh’s best-known coffee house. For Simanjuntak, “gathering and talking about everything in a coffee shop are part of the daily routines of all men in Aceh, consuming almost half of the day...Coffee shops now also function

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<sup>428</sup> Edy, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 5, 2010.

<sup>429</sup> Cut Farah, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Kalau misalnya aku pribadi, ah, lebih minta pendapat ke teman, jadi dari pendapat teman itu aku bisa mengatasi tantangan yang ada.*”

<sup>430</sup> Hotli Simanjuntak, “Aceh, Sharia, and Coffee Shops,” *The Jakarta Post* (July 13, 2010), <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/07/13/aceh-sharia-amp-coffee-shops.html> (accessed April 25, 2012).



as a main information center for village communities. They are the only type of village business kiosks subscribing to newspapers. Visitors are therefore gathering to get the latest information.”<sup>431</sup> While I was in Jakarta, I witnessed the grand opening of the Aceh Coffee Corner—a café that serves Acehnese food as well as various drinks. Cafés and restaurants such as this one are important “Acehnese-friendly” spaces where members of the Acehnese community in Jakarta can connect with one another and feel a sense of belonging within the diaspora.

In addition to meeting places that serve Acehnese coffee or food, events that celebrate Acehnese culture provide another venue for uniting Acehnese communities outside of Aceh. Acehnese students I interviewed in Yogyakarta told me that they frequently attend seminars and discussions that are organized by their Acehnese government representative or other elders within the community. These were places where Acehnese of all ages could voice their frustrations about life in the diaspora as well as events taking place within Aceh. Older Acehnese in Jakarta told me that such meetings were popular during the conflict, when Acehnese organized protests. When I asked Uty whether these kinds of events helped to address the obstacles she faces in Jakarta, she responded, “No. Because not all problems can be resolved by the community...But there are also problems that we can overcome with our community. For example, if we want to go back to Aceh, we hold seminars. We share our knowledge and experiences [of living] in Jakarta. We discuss. But as for everyday problems, that’s more of a personal concern.”<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Simanjuntak, “Aceh, Sharia, and Coffee Shops.”

<sup>432</sup> Uty, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 4, 2010. Indonesian: “*Ngak. Karena, ngak semua masalah itukan bisa selesai dengan komunitas...Tapi ada juga masalah kita bisa selesai dengan komunitas seperti misalnya...kita mau balik ke Aceh. Kita adakan seminar, buat, kita share tentang knowledge sama experience kita sama di Jakarta. Mungkin itu kita rembuk. Tapi kalau masalah-masalah yang sehari-hari, itu mungkin lebih ke pribadi.*”

Whereas seminars are events that older Acehnese organize to discuss issues that affect the Acehnese community as a whole, cultural performances and rehearsals tend to be initiated by Acehnese in their late teens or early twenties, and are often smaller, more intimate sessions that provide an opportunity to discuss personal affairs. Though Iwan Amir has observed that diaspora communities “regularly conduct activities to maintain their ties to the ethnic homeland, including teaching their children many forms of traditional music, dance and other cultural expressions of Aceh,” I found that Acehnese performance groups were usually organized by Acehnese students themselves.<sup>433</sup> *Sanggar*, or informal dance rehearsals, are popular among Acehnese students who want to connect, or reconnect, with Acehnese culture while living abroad. These Acehnese-organized *sanggar*, however, are only one way to interact with Acehnese performance in Jakarta. The next section investigates the different kinds of opportunities that exist in Jakarta for studying and performing Acehnese dance.

## **ACEHNESE DANCE IN JAKARTA**

Acehnese dance, with its fast-paced movements, its Islamic-influenced music, and its practice of gender segregation, is now one of the most recognized dance forms in Indonesia, a nation of over three hundred ethnic groups, each with its own traditional dances. As mentioned in the previous section, Acehnese dance is one of the most important ways that Acehnese maintain a sense of community in the diaspora, as it signifies their shared history, language, and cultural dress. This section investigates how Acehnese, as well as other Indonesians, interact with Acehnese dance performance in Jakarta.

### **Cultural Events**

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<sup>433</sup> Iwan Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere: Dynamics of the Traditional Vocal Performers in the Islamic Region of Aceh from the Late 19<sup>th</sup> to the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (PhD diss., Monash University School of Music, Melbourne, 2006), 227.

In Jakarta, Acehese dance is a principal element of Acehese-organized cultural events. These events include weddings, birthday parties, film screenings, book launchings, and business functions. An Acehese dance performance may also mark the opening of Acehese restaurants or cafés.

In addition to these specific events, Acehese dance is performed regularly at Taman Mini, a cultural park in Jakarta that celebrates Indonesia's diversity. This park, which was conceived in 1970 by former President Suharto's wife, Siti Hartinah, features thirty-three traditional houses, which represent the thirty-three provinces of Indonesia.<sup>434</sup> Each house is built according to the region's architectural style and contains information about the history, traditional attire, and handicrafts of the ethnic groups living within each region. Within the Aceh House, visitors can find information about Acehese resistance to Dutch colonization, photos of Dutch generals and Aceh's governors, Acehese weapons, jewelry, oils, and nuts, the traditional costumes from each of Aceh's eighteen regencies, drums, two cannons, and agricultural tools. A life-size plane is placed in front of the house, representing the first plane owned by the Indonesian nation, which Acehese donated to the Indonesian government.

The Aceh House also has its own stage, where children in Jakarta can learn traditional dance on Sunday mornings. This is not unique to the Aceh House; however, I was told that traditional dance lessons and other cultural activities are only available at the cultural houses whose members have a relatively large presence in Jakarta. For example, the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Taman Mini, which took place April 16-18, 2010, featured live music and dance performances at

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<sup>434</sup> Despite Mrs. Suharto's vision of Taman Mini as a symbol of national unity, the construction of the cultural theme park was widely protested by student activists, who felt that the funds used to build the park would be better spent on small industries or universities. The park's construction also resulted in the eviction of hundreds of South Jakarta residents, whose land was sold "well below market value" to Mrs. Suharto's Our Hope Foundation. For more on the controversies surrounding Taman Mini, see John Pemberton, *On the Subject of "Java"* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 152-161.

all of the houses, but only some of the houses brought in their own traditional dance troupes. At the Aceh House, children who attended the Sunday rehearsals gave a traditional dance performance at 10:00 AM on Sunday, April 18, 2010. But by the time I arrived, a teenage girl in high-heeled boots, a mini-skirt, and a tank-top was belting out an Indonesian pop song to a small audience. While the Maluku house and the South Sulawesi house had traditional and contemporary performances throughout the day, activities in the Aceh House died down at about 2:00 PM.

In addition to Acehnese-organized events and celebrations at Taman Mini, Acehnese dance has also become popular at national events. Dancers I met with told me that they had performed at government functions, at different embassies in Jakarta, for Independence Day parades and for religious holidays. In some cases, the dancers traveled outside of Jakarta to Bandung and Bogor. The fact that Acehnese dance has become a national dance was made clear to me when I attended a reunion celebration for Chinese-Indonesian students, now in their fifties and sixties, who had attended the same high school in Jakarta.<sup>435</sup> This event drew heavily on Chinese culture, as the brochure was written only in Chinese, and of the ten performances that were given, seven were traditional or contemporary Chinese dances with lyrics sung in Chinese. This left three dances that stressed the alumni's connection to Indonesian culture, and of those three dances, one was Acehnese performed by Pak Uki and his troupe of female dancers, the *Walet* dance company.

The fact that Acehnese dance was represented at a Chinese-Indonesian student reunion is somewhat remarkable, given that only seven years ago, Aceh was known throughout Indonesia as a site of conflict and political turmoil and not for its cultural practices. Since the end of the

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<sup>435</sup> This event was held at the Pekan Raya auditorium on May 23, 2010.

conflict, however, Acehese dance, particularly the Saman, has become widely known and widely practiced. Iwan Amir explains, “The sitting dances have become a national Indonesian symbol, in and outside the country. They have been taught on popular demand to students in schools in Jakarta and to non-Acehese troupes based in Europe, the USA, and Australia. Many groups of Indonesians living overseas learned to perform them during the tsunami/quake fund-raising efforts in late 2004 and early 2005. Thousands of non-Acehese-speaking performing groups in parts of the Malay-speaking world now perform these dances including in the cities of Minangkabau, West Kalimantan, West Malaysia, and Java, whether or not they have Acehese communities.”<sup>436</sup>

The popularity of Acehese dances throughout Indonesia increased as a result of the tsunami, which brought attention not only to the suffering of Acehese, but also to the ways in which Acehese communities attempted to overcome their suffering. In Jakarta, for example, coverage of the tsunami in Aceh was extensive, and many responded by donating money, food, clothing, or their time, traveling to Aceh as volunteers. Agus Nur Amal commented, “they reacted with a lot of emotion, very emotional, such that Jakarta was full of people competing to give help. In Jakarta, every village, each RT, RW [neighborhood organization] helped in solidarity, to give assistance; then it was sent to Aceh.”<sup>437</sup> Giving Indonesians an opportunity to invest emotionally in Aceh, the tsunami also drew their attention to Acehese culture. Cut Farah observed, “after the tsunami, Acehese dance began to develop more, because...on TV you

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<sup>436</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 260. It should be noted that the very notion of a regional dance serving as a national symbol can be traced to the New Order project of selecting, reconstructing, and cataloguing particular dances to represent “unity in diversity” within Indonesia. See Virginia Hooker, *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>437</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 20, 2010. Indonesian: “*Mereka bereaksi dengan sangat emosional, ya? Sangat emosional sehingga Jakarta pun penuh orang berlomba-lomba untuk memberi bantuan, begitu. Di Jakarta, tiap-tiap kampung, tiap-tiap RT, RW, membantu solidaritas, buat sumbangan-sumbangan, begitu, lalu dikirimkan ke Aceh.*”

could see [the dances] entertaining children affected by the tsunami.”<sup>438</sup> But these developments within Acehese traditional dance did not take place in Aceh. Instead, Acehese dance troupes were formed by students primarily in Jakarta, as they interpreted Acehese sitting dances in their own way and formed their own Acehese dance troupes. According to Iwan Amir, “the center for the spread of ‘Saman,’ one of the Acehese sitting dances, was not the conflict-ridden region itself, but instead the Indonesian capital, Jakarta.”<sup>439</sup> Today there are approximately one hundred Saman dance troupes formed mostly by high school students in Jakarta.

The overwhelming interest and support for Saman dance in Jakarta is not paralleled in Aceh, where UNESCO researchers found that Saman performances are in decline and villagers have little basic knowledge about this dance tradition. In a video UNESCO created to draw attention to the Saman dance, a staff member reported, “Villagers invite each other for Saman competitions, which build friendly and fraternal relationships. Unfortunately, such competitions are becoming less frequent. Traditional methods of transmission of Saman are becoming weakened. Many *mersah*, dormitories, are empty. Children are now busy with their studies at school. Saman is only performed on graduation days, or other special occasions at schools. Hardly any schools teach Saman as local content or extracurricular activities...Hardly five percent of respondents could name the nine parts of a Saman performance.”<sup>440</sup> In order to remedy this decline in local knowledge and practice of Saman, on April 7, 2010, UNESCO nominated the Saman dance to be included on its list of “Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding” and has made arrangements for preserving and renewing interest in the

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<sup>438</sup> Cut Farah, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Mungkin habis tsunami, tarian Aceh itu lebih makin berkembang, soalnya...pernah lihat TV, gitu, buatnya hiburan anak-anak tsunami itu.*”

<sup>439</sup> *Travel without Walking: The Journey of the Sitting Dances from Aceh to the Whole World*. DVD, dir. Iwan Amir (2006).

<sup>440</sup> *The Nomination of the Saman Dance as Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding*, DVD, UNESCO (2010).

dance.<sup>441</sup> Working with the Saman community, a group of Acehese who organize Saman performances in Aceh, UNESCO members plan to teach Saman regularly in schools, hold regular Saman festivals, and strengthen villagers' knowledge of the traditional dance.

According to UNESCO researchers, Saman is important to Acehese communities because it encourages friendships among participants and it “builds respect and cooperation among the players.”<sup>442</sup> However, Saman is traditionally an all-male dance and, in accordance with the Acehese tradition of gender-segregation, this means that women are not allowed to perform Saman. The UNESCO video about Saman reported, “Saman is only performed by boys, young men, and sometimes male adults. There is another dance called *Inus*, which is to be performed by girls.”<sup>443</sup> This was the only mention of women's performance activities in the film, and no efforts are being made to protect or rebuild this all-female dance. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Acehese women's relationship to their performing arts practices is already fragile, and may be in greatest need of support. Giving international attention and support to an all-male dance without offering similar protection to all-female dances, UNESCO is indirectly sending the message that Acehese girls and women's performance activities are insignificant.

The barriers preventing Acehese women from participating in Saman performances in Aceh are not as rigid in Jakarta, where the Saman dance has been embraced by women and men alike. This has caused some controversy for older Acehese artists, who argue that Saman is no longer Saman when women perform it. Instead, Acehese refer to the female version of Saman as *Ratoh Duek*. Moreover, the Saman dance originates from the Gayo Lues region in

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<sup>441</sup> For more information, see the UNESCO Press Release, “The Government of the Republic of Indonesia presented copy of the Nomination File of the Saman Dance to UNESCO Office, Jakarta 07 April 2010,” [http://portal.unesco.org/geography/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=12445&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/geography/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12445&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

<sup>442</sup> *Nomination of the Saman Dance*.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*

Southwestern Aceh and was developed by Gayo people, the largest ethnic minority in Aceh. This has caused some debate among artists as to whether the dance can be called “Acehnese” or not. Pak Idrus, an Acehnese musician who lives in Jakarta, explained, “‘Saman’ was originally called Ratoh Duek (‘Sitting Ratoh’) from South and Southwest Aceh...A person from Southeast Aceh, a brother of Ali Kasim, once protested to me because a newspaper reported that IKJ mixed males and females in the Saman dance. Acehnese only know that Saman is a Gayo dance, so they protested. It turns out that it was Ratoh Duek, not Saman, which has developed.”<sup>444</sup>

With women and non-Acehnese dancers performing Saman in Jakarta, the dance has developed into a variety of forms. On the one hand, this development of Saman has made the dance much more inclusive, and enabled it to spread across Indonesia as students adapt the dance according to their needs. However, some artists, particularly the older generations of Acehnese, insist that this is a corruption of Saman and worry that the traditional elements of Saman will be lost. Pak Idrus remarked, “I’m concerned that the speedy development of Saman may lead to a different path from our intended target. Initially, Acehnese dances have missionary characteristics. They were developed to aid the spread of Islam. This goal must never be omitted. I’m concerned if performers wear unsuitable costumes, and perform improper body movements and call it Acehnese Saman.”<sup>445</sup> Today, Saman serves primarily to entertain its performers and audiences, and has little religious significance for non-Acehnese performers.

### **Informal Instruction**

In addition to the dance troupes that perform at Acehnese and national events, there are also a number of informal dance troupes—that is, groups that rehearse “just for fun,” or, occasionally, for competitions. These groups do not perform regularly and their members are

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<sup>444</sup> *Travel without Walking*.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*



constantly changing. In most cases the dance troupes are formed and led by one or more Acehnese students, but the majority of the members are non-Acehnese. Moreover, many of the Acehnese members have little to no background in the performing arts. Cut Farah commented, “While I’ve been in Jakarta [I’ve noticed that] the Acehnese people that I know usually have never danced Acehnese dance before. It’s when they arrive in Jakarta that they then become interested in Acehnese dance...In Aceh there are already plenty of people who dance Acehnese dance, so they’re not really that interested. But, for example, in Jakarta...they’re more interested.”<sup>446</sup>

As mentioned in the previous section, most of the Acehnese individuals in Jakarta who decide to participate in traditional dance activities are students who are working towards achieving a decent job in the field of computer science and technology. Few of them have the time to begin their own dance troupe and manage rehearsals and performances. Moreover, many Acehnese students who decided to lead an informal dance troupe while in college have now graduated and the groups have dismantled. Reflecting on the Acehnese dance activities at Taman Iskandar Muda, Edy remarked, “in the past there was a Saman community here in this dorm. But now it’s already disbanded because everyone has graduated from university and...Sarjev [the manager] is going all over [the place]; he’s too busy. So no one can manage [the group].”<sup>447</sup> Another student who lived in Yogyakarta told me that Acehnese dance rehearsals had been taking place at her dorm for at least fifteen years, but already the number of

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<sup>446</sup> Cut Farah, interview, with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “Selama saya ke Jakarta, buat orang-orang Aceh yang saya kenal, mereka biasanya ngak pernah menari Aceh, begitu sampai di Jakarta, mereka jadi ikutan menari Aceh...Kalau di Aceh sendirikan, itu udah—yang menari Aceh itu terlalu banyak, jadi mereka ngak terlalu tertarik. Tapi kalau misalnya di Jakarta kan...mereka lebih tertarik.”

<sup>447</sup> Edy, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 5, 2010. Indonesian: “Dulu di sini, di asrama, ada community. There is Saman community, di sini, di asrama. Tapi sekarang sudah broken because semua sudah lulus university...dan Bang Sarjev sudah going all over, semua, ada sibuk, ya? Jadi no one can manage.”

members is shrinking.<sup>448</sup> Without Acehese dancers who are willing to devote their time and energy towards forming groups and managing rehearsals, informal Acehese dance troupes will disband.

Those Acehese individuals who have decided to take on the responsibility of managing a dance troupe have found that teaching non-Acehese members can be a challenge. Though many of the troupes welcome non-Acehese members, these individuals have a harder time picking up the rapid hand and arm movements as well as the song lyrics, which are usually in Acehese. When asked what the most difficult part of learning Acehese dance was, Uty responded, “First, memorizing the songs. If the words are wrong, and if we perform at a show for an all-Acehese audience, they’ll automatically pay attention to our pronunciation...Also, there are long movements, that’s if we’re doing the Saman dance.”<sup>449</sup>

This is also a problem for Acehese dance troupes outside of Indonesia. Alfira O’Sullivan, who manages the dance troupe *Suara Indonesia* in Sydney, Australia, explained, “Singing is the most difficult part because some of the local kids do not understand Indonesian. Because Indonesian is our second language, it is difficult to learn Acehese songs. Especially when we do not know the meaning of the lyrics. The songs are poetic and old. I asked for their meaning to an Acehese once, but he did not understand either, possibly because the songs are old. They are specifically for dancing. There are meanings, but we are not sure what they are.”<sup>450</sup> As a result of the language barrier, troupes may decide to incorporate Indonesian or other languages into the lyrics.

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<sup>448</sup> Lia, email message to author, May 9, 2010.

<sup>449</sup> Uty, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 4, 2010. Indonesian: “*Pertama menghafal lagu. Lagu, salah kata-katanya, kalau kita tampil di sebuah acara yang semuanya orang Aceh, otomatis mereka memperhatikan pronunciation kita, kan? ...Terus ada gerakan-gerakan yang panjang, itu kalau khusus buat tarian Saman.*”

<sup>450</sup> *Travel without Walking.*

One of the most notable aspects of the informal Acehese dance troupes in Jakarta is that in addition to having mostly non-Acehese members, the majority of the members are female. This is most likely due to Jakartans' perception that dancing is "women's work,"<sup>451</sup> or a feminine activity. Iwan Amir observed, "Girls and women—Acehese and non-Acehese—are the dominant participants in [Jakarta-based] *sanggars*. In the cities few men take part, due to the male view that dance-related activities are a female pastime."<sup>452</sup> This perspective can also be found in Aceh, however. Describing his first experience learning Acehese dance, Mor Murtala commented, "I studied dance since I was eleven years old. In the beginning I was a little hesitant, because dancing is usually done by women. But when I saw the *rapai geleng* dance, I immediately fell in love with Acehese dance."<sup>453</sup> The notion that "dancing is for girls" not only affects the membership of informal Acehese dance troupes, but it also influences students who study Acehese dance formally. Asnawi Abdullah, who teaches Acehese dance and music in Jakarta schools, remarked, "most Acehese dances that I taught in the schools were performed by women. Not many by men. I once asked some high school boys why they do not want to learn. They said it's because men are considered, well, how could a man dance? They feel that it is a bit gay (*banci*). I told them that there is no Acehese dance that teaches you to be gay...Even though they have soft elements, they still contain a certain strength. This is because Acehese dances have characteristics that are valiant, courageous and defiant."<sup>454</sup>

Although some Indonesians hold the perception that dancing is "feminine" or "gay," this is not necessarily a major obstacle for men who wish to perform Acehese dance. For example,

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<sup>451</sup> Mor Murtala, email message to author, May 16, 2010. Indonesian: "*Anak-anak laki-laki biasanya menganggap menari adalah pekerjaan perempuan.*"

<sup>452</sup> Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere," 227.

<sup>453</sup> Mor Murtala, email message to author, May 16, 2010. Indonesian: "*Saya belajar tari mulai umur sebelas tahun, awalnya saya sedikit ragu, karena menari itu biasanya dilakukan perempuan. Tapi ketika melihat tari Rapai Geleng, saya langsung jatuh cinta pada tari-tari Aceh.*"

<sup>454</sup> *Travel without Walking*.

the students I spoke with at IKJ told me that this perception primarily applies to males who study contemporary dance or ballet as opposed to traditional dances. In fact, one student commented that men who take on the traditionally “feminine” roles within Javanese dance, as well as women who take on the traditionally “masculine” roles, are better dancers because they learn a wider range of movements. In addition, those boys or men like Mor Murtala who are afraid of appearing “feminine” by choosing to pursue Acehese dance, tend to forget these fears upon performing the dance with a group of other males who have made the same decision. These men are also encouraged by an Acehese society and international organizations that have shown greater support for and acceptance of male performance activities in Aceh. As a result, the perception that “dancing is for girls” is more prevalent in Jakarta than in Aceh.

Despite the fact that Jakartans may be more accepting of women who pursue dance than of men, Acehese women who perform Acehese dance face an obstacle of their own: a lack of self-confidence. When asked to describe how they feel when performing Acehese dance, many of the Acehese girls I spoke to admitted that they got nervous in front of an audience and were afraid of making a mistake. Cut Farah responded, “in the beginning, the first time I danced, I was always nervous. But now I’m used to it, so, I don’t get too nervous.”<sup>455</sup> Winny also noted, “I feel rather nervous. Because, if I mess up I’ll be embarrassed! Because maybe...if they’re Acehese who are watching, I’ll be embarrassed if I do something wrong.”<sup>456</sup> Though feelings of nervousness did not prevent these girls from dancing, such feelings did influence their perception of their performance and, at times, their ability to perform the movements. For Uty, who also confessed to feeling nervous during performances, this issue does not affect Acehese

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<sup>455</sup> Cut Farah, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Waktu awal, awal, pertama menari, itu selalu nervous, tapi insya’allah sekarang terbiasa udah ngak terlalu.*”

<sup>456</sup> Winny, interview with author, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Perasaannya agak nervous, ya? Soalnya, kalau salah itu malu!...Kalau mungkin...orang Aceh langsung yang lihat mungkin malu ya kalau, ketika salah.*”

men to the extent that it affects Acehnese women. She explained, “Women are definitely more bothered and more nervous than guys. Because guys are already more relaxed. They may get nervous but you can’t really tell. As for women, if they’re already nervous...you can tell! It’s hard to make the movements, it’s difficult. It’s a significant difference. They are more relaxed and girls are more nervous...[While dancing] this is what I’m thinking: ‘Afraid of messing up, afraid of messing up,’ like that.”<sup>457</sup>

These comments resonate with my hypothesis that the conflict, the tsunami, and the aftermath of these events in Aceh—including the implementation of *syariah* law and a lack of support for women’s political participation—have created an environment in which Acehnese women are discouraged from, and feel uncomfortable, performing in public spaces. Debra Yatim, who has witnessed numerous Acehnese dance performances both in Aceh and in Jakarta, believes that *syariah* law is responsible not only for diminishing women’s confidence in their ability to perform, but has also restricted women’s movements and prevented female dancers in Aceh from embracing the movements as their own. Debra observed, “In the past 5 years, [if] you see a Saman or a Ratoh Duek, the female version, if you see it performed in Jakarta, the movement is more free. Well, obviously! If you’re not fixated with *syariah*, obviously you can explore your body movements. And then you go to Aceh, they’re more restrained. For example, sometimes the tempo gets into a crescendo. But they [in Aceh] do not go to that crescendo because it’s unseemly. They do not spread their legs, which means you don’t explore anything.”<sup>458</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Uty, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 4, 2010. Indonesian: “Perempuan pasti lebih repot dan lebih nervous daripada laki-laki. Karena, laki-laki udah lebih santai. Walaupun mereka nervous tapi, nggak terlalu kelihatan. Tapi kalau perempuan, udah nervous...udah, gitu! Susah buat bergerak, itu susah, mungkin kalau aku bilang, itu signifikan perbedaannya. Mereka lebih santai dan, kalau cewek, lebih nervous... Karena, mungkin kupikirkan ini: takut salah, taku salah, takut salah, gitukan.”

<sup>458</sup> Debra Yatim, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 12, 2010.

Coming from an environment that strictly regulates women's bodies, particularly within public spaces, and having no prior experience in the performing arts, Acehese girls understandably encounter feelings of nervousness when performing in front of audiences in Jakarta. Moreover, Acehese girls who are studying in Jakarta are aware that their primary goal is to excel in school and focus on their future career goals. As I discussed in Chapter 2, performance activities are not considered an acceptable career goal for Acehese girls or women, and instead, "women do art only as a hobby, to fill free time during their school years."<sup>459</sup> My interviews with Acehese girls who dance in Jakarta suggest that the notion of performance as nothing more than a "hobby" has been deeply internalized. To devote a significant degree of time and energy to Acehese dance would not only be a luxury, it would also conflict with Acehese societal attitudes towards women and performance.

### **Formal Instruction** ***Arts Appreciation Program***

In addition to performing in Acehese events, national festivals, and informal dance troupes, individuals can also study Acehese dance in schools in Jakarta. The *Apresiasi Seni*, or Arts Appreciation program, for example, gives students the opportunity to learn Acehese dance from professional Acehese artists. As a means of heightening Indonesians' awareness of their many traditional dances, the Arts Appreciation program offers dance classes as an extra-curricular class for middle school and high school students, bringing in local artists as instructors. Students can decide on the type of dance that they want to learn, but usually the

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<sup>459</sup> Yusrizal Ibrahim, "Elly Zuarni: Meniti Seni di Tengah Badai Aceh," *Journal of Indonesian Performing Arts* 12(2003-2004): 162. Indonesian: "Di Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam...para wanita berkesenian hanya sebagai hobi pengisi waktu luang pada usia masih sekolah. Ketika mereka selesai sekolah dan berumah tangga, semua aktivitas kesenian segera ditinggalkan. Hanya satu dua orang saja yang menekuni kegiatan ini sebagai pelatih di sanggar-sanggar dan sekolah-sekolah."

most popular dances—Javanese, Balinese, the Minangkabau plate dance, and now Acehese—are offered. Asnawi Abdullah explained:

*Apresiasi Seni* (Art Appreciation)...is aimed to introduce traditional Indonesian dances into public schools...Acehnese artists were brought in to perform in schools. Balinese artists, same thing. All schools. After the students watched the performance, a discussion session was held. Hopefully both teachers and students will be interested in that art form. If they are interested in Acehese or Balinese art forms, trainers will be sent regularly to these schools. They were sent to high schools or specialist schools for a duration of 3 months for thorough training sessions. The trainers were paid by the *Apresiasi Seni* program.<sup>460</sup>

The Arts Appreciation program, in addition to coverage of the tsunami in Aceh, has contributed to the popularity of Saman in Jakarta. According to Iwan Amir, “Training programs based in public schools, such as the Art Appreciation program, turned this dance into an activity on par with sports or other extracurricular activities. At the annual High School Saman Competition in 2004, around 50 places were available for competing teams. Over 80 ‘Saman’ teams applied to compete.”<sup>461</sup>

While I was in Jakarta I had the opportunity to observe one of Asnawi’s classes and to ask him about his experience in the Arts Appreciation program. Like the younger Acehese students I spoke with who have taken on the responsibility of leading their own dance troupe (with mostly non-Acehnese members), Asnawi found that the most difficult part of his job is teaching students the vocal parts, since they have no idea how to pronounce words in the Acehese language and their ears are untrained in the Acehese musical style. Students also

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<sup>460</sup> *Travel without Walking*.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*

have difficulty with the movements of Acehnese dance, which can be physically demanding, and with concentration. Asnawi explained, “The first thing I teach when I am teaching dance, before the movement, is the vocal part. I told them to practice their choral singing first. We have not started to move yet; we’re just sitting down, learning to sing... This is the bait. These kids must enjoy the song first. Once they mastered the songs, the body movements are easier to learn. If they learned the body movements first, then they will have a harder time. This includes laziness, fatigue, pain, especially from kneeling. But once they can sing, then we start practicing the body movements.”<sup>462</sup> At the school I visited, which was one of several different schools where Asnawi teaches, the students met once a week for two hours. As this was their sixteenth rehearsal, the students were mostly familiar with both the vocal and physical parts. However, they still struggled to sing the notes in the way that Asnawi taught them, and he had them repeat the chorus several times, following his example. By the end of the class the students were clearly anxious to get home to start their homework or meet up with their friends.

The Arts Appreciation program is a good way for Indonesian students to receive professional instruction in a traditional dance with which they are unfamiliar. Because the instructors come to them and because the classes fit into their existing schedules, it is easier for these students to learn the dances than if they tried to make the hour-long drive to Taman Mini every Sunday morning. For Asnawi, who is concerned with the survival of Acehnese traditions, the dance program is a good opportunity to spread knowledge about Acehnese culture. Asnawi remarked, “From the very beginning when I got here they didn’t know [about Acehnese dance]. [They said] ‘I don’t know, what is it? What’s it like? What’s Acehnese dance like?’ ... It’s better for them to have some familiarization [with Acehnese culture] than to not know anything

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid.



about it at all...If they've never seen it, never tried it, the tradition will disappear."<sup>463</sup>

Unfortunately, the existence of Acehese arts programs in Jakarta schools depends upon the students' interest in learning Acehese arts forms. If students have a greater interest in learning Balinese dance, for example, then Balinese instructors will be brought into the schools and the Acehese dance classes will be discontinued.

### ***Jakarta Arts Institute (IKJ)***

Students can also study Acehese dance at an advanced level at Jakarta's Arts Institute (IKJ), taking Acehese dance and music classes with Pak Uki. Here, students learn not only how to pronounce Acehese lyrics but also the meaning and history behind the songs. Students are also required to create their own choreographies in their senior year, which gives them the opportunity to develop Acehese dance into a form that has personal significance for them. Moreover, Jakarta hosts numerous dance and music festivals, where IKJ's young choreographers gain professional experience and perform their own creations.

Many Acehese artists and students I spoke with believed that Jakarta is the best place in all of Indonesia to learn Acehese dance because of the educational facilities and the opportunities for performing and developing one's own dances. Though there are plans to develop an arts institute like IKJ in Aceh, currently no such facility exists. The only available institution in which to study performance formally is Prodi Sendratasik, an arts program located within the department of Teacher Training and Education Sciences at Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh.<sup>464</sup> Prodi Sendratasik, which stands for *Program Studi Seni Drama, Tari, dan*

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<sup>463</sup> Asnawi Abdullah, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 12, 2010. Indonesian: "Dari awal saya masuk mereka belum tahu. "Saya belum tahu, apa sih? Seperti apa? Tarian Aceh seperti apa?...Kita jelasi mereka...Jadi mereka, lebih baik mengenal dibandingkan yang tidak kenal sama sekali...Kalau mereka tidak pernah melihat, tidak pernah mencoba, akan dihilangi."

<sup>464</sup> Ari Jauhari, "Shining the Talent of Acehese Artist: Discourse about Higher Education of the Arts for Aceh," *Pasai Post* (June 8, 2008), <http://www.cosmoscopia.de/pasaipost/?m=200806> (accessed April 25, 2012), 2.

*Musik* (The Department of Drama, Dance, and Music) was built approximately twenty years ago and has “1 administration room, 1 dance exercise room, 1 music practice room, 1 art studio room, 3 class rooms, 1 storage room, and 1 equipment room;” however, the building was significantly damaged by the 2004 tsunami and many of these resources were lost.<sup>465</sup> For students who wish to pursue a degree in the arts, rather than arts education, their closest option is STSI Padang Panjang in West Sumatra, but STSI does not offer classes in Acehnese performing arts.<sup>466</sup> In contrast, IKJ has offered Acehnese dance and music classes since 1975 and, according to Iwan Amir, is “the most prominent institution for promoting traditional Acehnese music and dance.”<sup>467</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of its prestige, IKJ is expensive, costing students approximately \$1000 per semester. This is an unrealistic expense for most Indonesian students and as a result, students at IKJ depend on scholarships or hold at least one job. As I mentioned earlier, Acehnese who have traveled to Jakarta have done so in search of better educational and work opportunities, which are often intended to support Acehnese families back home. Few Acehnese families would support their child’s decision to leave Aceh in pursuit of an expensive arts degree, which from their perspective, is a poor investment. At the time that I visited IKJ, there were no Acehnese students in the Dance Department, and only four that I knew of who had graduated in the past ten years.

As a result of the low numbers of Acehnese students at IKJ, Pak Uki has grown accustomed to teaching Acehnese dance to non-Acehnese. As with other instructors, Uki agreed that learning the vocal parts is the hardest part of the class for non-Acehnese students. However,

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<sup>465</sup> Jauhari, “Shining the Talent of Acehnese Artist,” 2.

<sup>466</sup> Mor Murtala, email message to author, May 16, 2010.

<sup>467</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 227.

Uki is interested in developing Acehese arts so that they are more accessible to non-Acehnese audiences and participants. He also encourages the students to learn to improvise in languages other than Acehese, which is actually part of Acehese tradition. In what he refers to as the “extra” sections of the song, the students can sing in Arabic, Hindi, Indonesian, English, or any other language, as long as the rhythm and the notes fit in with the rest of the piece.

In addition to basic movements and singing patterns, Uki also tries to instill in his students the values inherent in Acehese dance. Again, this may be difficult for non-Acehnese, since, Uki explains, these values include “the value of knowledge, religious values, social values, artistic values, economical values. Then, also, there’s an additional element...you have to be a Muslim Acehese person. There’s an element of religiosity in there, too.”<sup>468</sup> Although many of Uki’s students are Muslim, their relationship to Islam is necessarily different from Acehese individuals’ relationship to their religion, which has been shaped by a distinct history and distinct cultural practices. However, Uki does not believe that this aspect of Acehese dance excludes non-Acehnese. He also believes that non-Acehnese can learn *roh Aceh*, or the spirit of Acehese dance. When asked how he teaches his students to achieve the *roh Aceh*, Uki responded, “there’s just one key: they have to have discipline. If they’re not disciplined in their training, not disciplined in [whatever], they won’t get it, no matter how great they are at dancing.”<sup>469</sup> In fact, the *roh Aceh* may be the very element that draws non-Acehnese to Acehese dance. Uki explained, “from what I’ve seen, there’s one thing that’s interesting in Acehese dance, and that’s the spirit. There’s an extraordinary power in it...and once they start, they can get a little

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<sup>468</sup> Pak Uki, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 15, 2010. Indonesian: “*Karena di dalam tari Aceh itu, ada beberapa nilai. Yaitu ada nilai pengetahuan, nilai religious, nilai sosial, nilai seni, nilai ekonomi. Kemudian juga, semua itu, ada unsur-unsur yang disamping dia...dia harus orang Aceh Muslim. Ada unsur agamaisnya di dalam juga.*”

<sup>469</sup> Pak Uki, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 29, 2010. Indonesian: “*Kalau itu mendapatkan itu satu kuncinya, dia harus disiplin. Kalau dia tidak disiplin dengan latihan, tidak disiplin apa, nggak akan ketemu, sekuat apapun dia menari.*”

hysterical...And one thing in Acehese dance: whatever they've done, they want [it] fast, they want it more—sometimes they can't restrain their emotions. Often, if they can't restrain their emotions, they scream: *krrrrrrrrrrrah!* They can't control themselves.”<sup>470</sup>

Although the language barrier and an unfamiliarity with Acehese culture may put Uki's students at a slight disadvantage, Uki has found that his students in Jakarta were able to pick up the movements more quickly than individuals he has taught in Aceh.<sup>471</sup> This may be directly related to the lack of formal arts education resources in Aceh. Asnawi Abdullah explains, “Before dancing, one must first *become* a dancer. Once you become a dancer, then you can dance. In Aceh, people just dance casually...Their songs and body movements are makeshift...In contrast, a dancer must master dancing techniques. He must master his body, the flexibility of the body...No such thing exists in Aceh. In Aceh there is no warm-up, no dance technique.”<sup>472</sup> In this sense, although Uki's students do not speak Acehese, they have extensive background in dance performance and are able to quickly adapt to the kinds of movements that Acehese dance demands.

Uki has also found that the choreographies his students produce in Jakarta tend to be more creative and exploratory than those of Acehese dancers. When asked what makes a good choreographer, he responded, “In my opinion, each person...must have extensive experience; they have to study with others. We can't say that we're great, or that other people are better than

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<sup>470</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: “*Kalau saya melihat, ada satu hal yang menarik di dalam tari Aceh itu, ada sebuah semangat. Ada sebuah power yang luar biasa yang ada dalam...Dan dia bisa, kalau udah mulai, bisa histeris...Dan satu hal dalam tarian Aceh, apabila dia sudah jadi, dia pingin cepat, pingin lebih—kadang-kadang tidak bisa kendali emosi. Sering, kalau kita tidak bisa kendali emosi, dia teriak: krrrrrrrrrha! Tidak terkontrol...bisa lepas kontrol jadinya.*”

<sup>471</sup> Pak Uki, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 15, 2010. Indonesian: “*Untuk mencapai gerak, itu lebih mudah orang Jakarta daripada orang tradisi.*”

<sup>472</sup> *Travel without Walking.*

us...we need to study with other people as well. We can't just develop [dances] on our own."<sup>473</sup>

For Uki, working with and learning from other dancers outside of Aceh is one of the most important experiences a choreographer can have. He comments, "If the choreographer has a lot of experience, or has already gotten an education, or has been to Jakarta...often the Acehnese kids, they go home [to Aceh]. They can make something there. Thus, the kind of knowledge that's required [to be a good choreographer] is not from their education, but from experience...with their other friends here."<sup>474</sup>

Though certainly performance activities in Aceh encourage working together with others, learning from colleagues outside of Aceh can open dancers' eyes to new movement vocabularies and expose them to a variety of artistic projects, some of which might be discouraged—or even forbidden—in Aceh. Of course, traveling to Jakarta to study Acehnese dance at an advanced level is unrealistic for most Acehnese. It is also unlikely that Acehnese dancers who study at an advanced level will return to Aceh to perform their pieces and share their knowledge and experiences. Although Uki mentioned that this was a possibility, my own observations reveal that most Acehnese dancers who study in Jakarta tend to remain in Jakarta, taking advantage of the opportunities to collaborate with dancers from all over Indonesia and to perform their pieces for large audiences. In contrast, the *syariah* police maintain tight restrictions on the kinds of performance activities that take place in Aceh, where experimental dance pieces are not well-received.

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<sup>473</sup> Pak Uki, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 29, 2010. Indonesian: "*Kalau menurut saya, setiap orang...harus punya pengalaman yang luas, harus belajar dengan orang lain. Tidak bisa kita bilang kita hebat, atau orang lebih hebat dari kita...kita perlu belajar dengan orang lain juga. Tidak bisa kita sendiri untuk membangun, ngak bisa.*"

<sup>474</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: "*Kalau koreografernya itu banyak pengalaman, atau melalui pernah pendidikan, atau pernah di Jakarta, di sini...sering anak-anak Aceh, pulang dia. Bisa dia berbuat sesuatu di sana. Jadi ilmu yang dituntut bukan dari sebuah pendidikan, tapi dengan pengalaman...dengan teman-teman lain di sini dia.*"

While I was in Jakarta, I had the opportunity to meet with Nina, an Acehnese woman in her mid-twenties who graduated from IKJ in 2004. Unsurprisingly, Nina chose to remain in Jakarta, working with fellow choreographers at IKJ to produce new works. Her dance pieces have explored such topics as the daily lives of Acehnese women, the Bali bombing, and the period of the GAM conflict when Aceh was declared a Military Operations Zone (DOM). Though Nina has performed her pieces in Malaysia, Singapore, and, just a few days after our interview, was headed to Russia for a dance performance, she has never brought her pieces to Aceh. Nina commented, “I really want to [perform] in Aceh. In Jakarta [my works] have already been performed, but not yet in Aceh, because at the time I was thinking about whether or not contemporary dance would be received, specifically in Aceh. Because in Aceh there are definitely people who think ‘Contemporary *what?* What’s that?’ And then to see women dancing in maybe a coarse way. But at least [I] want to show them... We’re open.”<sup>475</sup> When I asked Nina if there were many other Acehnese choreographers based in Jakarta, she replied, “I only know that there’s a guy named Pak Asnawi Abdullah and there’s a woman named Ruli Novarita, both of them alumni from IKJ. Actually there’s another IKJ alumni named Cut Aja Riska. She doesn’t develop dance often because her vocal skills are really good, so she became a singer. She chose to do that instead of dancing. For a wife who is already married, though, maybe she’s busy now with the household routine. She’s not active [as a performer] anymore.”<sup>476</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Nina, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 21, 2010. Indonesian: “*Pingin sekali di Aceh, kalau di Jakarta udah. Jakarta sudah, nah di Aceh belum, karena aku memikirkan pada saat itu apakah bisa diterima tari kontemporer di Aceh khususnya. Karenakan kalau di Aceh pasti orang memikrannya, ‘‘Kontemporer itu apa? Itu bagaimana?’ Itukan? Terus melihat yang perempuan menari yang mungkin secara keras...Tetapi setidaknya pingin menonton mereka...kita buka.*”

<sup>476</sup> Ibid. Indonesian: “*Yang Aceh, saya hanya tahu, bisa laki-laki itu Pak Asnawi Abdullah, kemudian yang perempuan adalah Ruli Novarita, alumni, dua-duanya alumni IKJ. Sebenarnya ada satu lagi alumni IKJ, namanya Cut Aja Riska. Tetapi beliau sering bukanya tari diperkembang tapi karena vocalnya bagus, itu dia menjadi*

As my conversations with Uki and Nina as well as my observations in Jakarta reveal, Acehnese who want to become professional choreographers must leave Aceh. Traveling to Jakarta, they will benefit from classes with Acehnese instructors as well as the opportunity to work with students from all over Indonesia and to perform at professional venues. Unfortunately, it is rare for Acehnese to be able to pursue such advanced education in the arts and even more unlikely for Acehnese women. Those Acehnese who have been fortunate enough to travel to Jakarta often choose to remain abroad. All of this suggests that the development of Acehnese performing arts and artists is confined to Jakarta. However, as I will explore in the following section, some of the developments taking place in Jakarta have filtered back into Aceh and have influenced how Acehnese understand their performance traditions.

### **Remaking Traditions**

With an impressive arts institute, numerous professional Acehnese arts instructors, and an environment that is receptive to experimental choreographies, Jakarta offers unparalleled opportunities for Acehnese artists to develop their craft. As a result of the popularity of the Saman dance and the large number of informal Acehnese dance troupes, Jakarta is also a good place for Acehnese who want to perform at a non-professional level. Not all Acehnese artists, however, are enthusiastic about the Acehnese arts scene in Jakarta. For some, Acehnese dance has undergone several changes in the diaspora, and these changes pose a threat to their traditions.

### ***Challenging Authenticity***

Acehnese professional artists who have spent some time living in Jakarta have noticed several key distinctions in the ways in which Acehnese dance is performed in the diaspora. For example, Asnawi Abdullah has found that Jakarta's audiences often request shorter

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*penyanyi, lebih memilih seperti itu. Bagi istri yang menikah mungkin sibukan dari rutinitas rumah tangga, bukan aktif lagi."*

performances. He explains, “here (in Jakarta), everything depends on the demand. If the demand for the event is for a 3-minute performance, then it will be designed to last 3 minutes. So it is not the complete thing. In Aceh if you ask to cut 10 minutes into 3, no way! That’s the difference.”<sup>477</sup> Cut Aja Riska also noticed a difference in the role of the *syeh*, who is usually responsible for leading the dancers and improvising with the lyrics. Cut Riska comments, “in dances such as Seudati, Laweuet, or Rampoe, there are *syeh* (lead dancer) and *apet* (second dancer). They usually lead the dance, not just the body movements but also the rhyming verses. Especially during the exchange of verses with the *aneuk syahe* (singers) in the sideline. In Jakarta, however, the singing was initiated and conducted just by the *aneuk syahe*. The *syeh* simply dance. I have never seen a *syeh* (in Jakarta) that can also create and sing poetry. They only lead the dance but not in the song and lyrics.”<sup>478</sup> This may be due to the fact that improvising is done traditionally in the Acehese language. Even if the troupe’s *syeh* is Acehese, audiences in Jakarta are unlikely to understand lyrics sung in Acehese, and as a result, the language is changed to Indonesian.

Cut Riska also detected a difference in the content of the improvisatory lyrics. She observed, “in the villages, people prefer songs with critical and sarcastic lyrics. In Aceh, music is mainly an oral art form. What happened yesterday or today can be turned into a song lyric. Social developments, youth activities, many things can be used...However, in the cities, people prefer the traditional songs. They do not like those *dangdut* songs or Indian songs turned into Acehese.”<sup>479</sup> Though Cut Riska finds that performers and audiences in Jakarta prefer traditional songs without improvisation, other artists have speculated that Jakarta’s artists lack

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<sup>477</sup> *Travel without Walking*.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid*.



the skill to perform improvisation, which would explain why this practice is in decline.

Unfortunately, many Acehnese artists have found that the improvisatory skills required to be a *syeh* are also lacking in Aceh. A. Bakar Ar., an Acehnese musician based in Aceh, explains, “it is difficult to become an *aneuk syahe* (singer). If we want to recruit *syeh* and dancers, it’s easy...*aneuk syahe* must be carefully selected. I’m not boasting, but as an *aneuk syahe* I toured nationally and internationally. With other Acehnese singers it is difficult. Nobody wants to. If we ask them to come, they just dismiss you offhand. They do not have the know-how. I taught several *aneuk syahe* before, but none followed. They don’t get it. Either they lack vibrato, they have short breath, or their voice is not good enough.”<sup>480</sup>

Some Acehnese artists are concerned that the transformations their traditions have undergone in Jakarta are being reproduced in Aceh and are affecting how Acehnese understand their traditions back home. For example, Uki has found that students in Aceh have become increasingly dependent upon counting systems to follow the rhythms of Acehnese dance, rather than following their intuition. Uki explained, “in the past, when Acehnese people were studying dance, there wasn’t “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.” There wasn’t that. The *syeh* was there and the rehearsal went like this: “Oh walk like this, oh go over there.” Indeed, as I was saying earlier, the dance can’t be counted with this [taps the floor]...But now...this numbers system has been created, the 1, 2, 3, 4, only for learning purposes. But indeed it enters into their form.”<sup>481</sup> For Asnawi, these kinds of changes have caused Acehnese to lose sight of what is “really” Acehnese tradition.

Asnawi remarked, “what is traditional? What is becoming traditional? What is a new creation? What is collaborative art? Nobody in Aceh knows. There are so many dance forms that appear

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Pak Uki, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 29, 2010. Indonesian: “Dulu, orang Aceh itu kalau belajar tari ini nggak ada satu, dua, tiga, empat, lima, enam, nggak ada. Syehnya ada, pelatihnya jalan, ‘O, jalan begini, o jalan ke sini.’ Memang tarian itukan saya bilang tadi tidak bisa diukur dengan ini [taps the floor]...Tapi sekarang...baru diciptakan, angka 1, 2, 3, 4...hanya untuk belajar. Tapi begitu masuk dalam bentuknya...”

in Aceh...Being traditional is not just a matter of putting on a costume. People do not understand. They see the PKA festival and declare, ‘Aceh has a lot of traditional dances.’ Sure there are many titles; however, they have changed significantly...In Aceh? Nobody knows what titles were attached to the dances. The current generation already thinks of them as ‘traditional.’”<sup>482</sup> In this way, the development of Acehnese performance traditions is considered a threat by older, professional Acehnese artists.

### ***Gender Segregation***

Another key distinction between Acehnese dance performed in Jakarta and Acehnese dance performed in Aceh is the degree to which the tradition of gender segregation is observed. Iwan Amir explains, “the mixing of genders is tolerated in Jakarta and other major cities in Indonesia, especially when the audience is predominantly non-Acehnese.”<sup>483</sup> However, some Acehnese artists “tolerate” gender mixing only when choreographers acknowledge that the dances are not traditional, but are instead “new creations,” or *kreasi baru*. Mor Murtala reflected, “according to tradition, usually the arts that are specifically performed by women are also viewed by women, like the *Rateb Meusekat* dance. But with developments now there are lots of dances that in the past were only danced by men and now they are performed by women...Acehnese culture never forbid women to dance, but there aren’t dances that integrate men and women (together)...except in *kreasi baru* dances.”<sup>484</sup> Other artists, like Pak Uki, “tolerate” and even encourage gender mixing because it allows more people to participate in dance performance.

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<sup>482</sup> *Travel without Walking*.

<sup>483</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 206-7.

<sup>484</sup> Mor Murtala, email message to author, May 17, 2010. Indonesian: “*Secara tradisional biasanya kesenian-kesenian yang khusus dimainkan oleh perempuan juga ditonton oleh perempuan seperti tari Rateb meusekat. Tapi perkembangannya sekarang banyak tari yang dulu hanya ditarikan oleh laki-laki sekarang sudah dimainkan oleh kaum perempuan..Budaya aceh tidak pernah melarang perempuan untuk menari tapi tidak ada tarian yang menggabungkan antara laki-laki dan perempuan..kecuali tari itu tari kreasi baru.*”

Cut Farah's dance troupe, which consists of four Acehnese girls, six non-Acehnese girls, and two non-Acehnese boys, offers an interesting example of gender-mixing in Jakarta. Rather than exclude the males from her performances, Cut creates new formations for the males, attempting to stay as close to Acehnese tradition as possible. They also perform Saman, which is traditionally an all-male dance. Because she has departed from the tradition, however, Cut refers to her performances as *kreasi baru*. In regards to a performance I observed at the opening of the Aceh Coffee Corner, in which the two males in her troupe flanked the line of female dancers, Cut explained, "yes, because, I was also like, how can you do that? For example, there [in Aceh], we definitely have to follow the rules there, whereas here, a lot of men and women are mixing, and also we don't have very many members. So, we didn't want to [change the dance], but we didn't have a choice."<sup>485</sup> Uty, who performed with Cut at the Aceh Coffee Corner, agreed that such a performance would not have been allowed in Aceh. She told me, "if we perform in Aceh and everyone is a girl except there are two guys, like the other day, maybe there would be a controversy. They will say, 'We don't agree with that. Because, this is Aceh. This is Saman. Saman is boy-boy, girl-girl, you know? Maybe the audience will be like that...because in Aceh, they're still under *syariah* law. So in Aceh, you can't do girls together with boys, mixing."<sup>486</sup> With greater freedom to experiment with Acehnese traditions, dancers in Jakarta are able to create performances that meet their own needs. Though some see this as a way for more

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<sup>485</sup> Cut Farah, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: "Karena, saya juga gi mana kalau misalnya di sana, kita memang harus mengikuti aturan di sana, sedangkan kalau di sini banyak orang yang laki-laki dan perempuannya dicampur, dan lagi kita gak punya banyak anggota. Makanya, gak mau, gak ada pilihan."

<sup>486</sup> Uty, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 4, 2010. Indonesian: "Kalau misalnya kita tampil di Aceh, semua cewek, tapi ada dua cowok, seperti kemarin, mungkin berada kontroversi. Mereka akan bilang, 'Ngak setujuh kalau seperti itu. Karena, ini Aceh. Saman, Saman cewek-cewek, cowok-cowok, gitukan? Mungkin dari penonton seperti itu...Karena kalau di Aceh...masih ada syariah Islam. Jadi, kenapa, kalau di Aceh itu, di Aceh kan gak boleh. Cewek sama cowok itu, campur? Ngak boleh.'"

individuals to interact with Acehese dance, others are worried that the development of Acehese performance practices is in conflict with the preservation of Acehese traditions.

### ***The Function of Tradition***

Whether or not Acehese believe that their performance traditions are threatened, Acehese diasporans feel strongly that these traditions are still significant today and serve a variety of purposes in their daily lives. For example, every Acehese I spoke with told me that s/he feels personally responsible for protecting Acehese traditions and keeping these traditions alive. Even individuals who did not perform Acehese dance felt that this cultural practice was an important aspect of their identity and tried to support Acehese arts by attending performances in Jakarta. When I asked Cut Farah why she felt that she was personally responsible for protecting Acehese traditions, she responded, “for the sake of Aceh, so Aceh can be known more by people. In the past, Aceh wasn’t really known by many people; there was no spotlight on Aceh. So, with [the traditions], such as dances, people became more familiar with Aceh.”<sup>487</sup> In addition to familiarizing other Indonesians with Acehese culture, some Acehese saw their cultural performances as a way to change negative opinions that might exist about Aceh. Winny explained, “in my opinion, people don’t really care about Aceh, because it’s too far, maybe, from the city center, from the capital...But if there are dances, then at least Aceh exists, so by performing we can revive Aceh’s name. Because in my opinion that’s very important. So we can indirectly familiarize people with our culture, and people will recognize it. [They will say] ‘Oh, actually Aceh is as good as this.’ So they will have a different view of

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<sup>487</sup> Cut Farah, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Karena biar Aceh itu lebih dikenal sama orang, soalnya, dulunya, Aceh kan ngak terlalu dikenal sama orang, ngak terlalu disorot. Jadi dengan adanya, kayak tari-tari ya gini, orang lebih kena—lebih kenal dengan Aceh.*”

Aceh.”<sup>488</sup> In this sense, Acehnese youth see their performance traditions as a positive aspect of their culture that can not only spread awareness about Acehnese people and practices, but can help improve outsiders’ views of Aceh, primarily by deemphasizing Aceh’s associations with violence and disaster.

Acehnese in Jakarta also saw their performance practices as an opportunity to socialize and form bonds with other Acehnese diasporans as well as non-Acehnese who shared an interest in Acehnese culture. For Lia, an Acehnese student in Yogyakarta, Acehnese dance rehearsals offered a place to “meet up, get rid of our feelings of homesickness, to motivate and energize us, and to strengthen our bonds.”<sup>489</sup> In this sense, dance rehearsals offer another “Aceh-friendly” space—and a tactic—through which Acehnese diasporans can resist some of the challenges they face while abroad.

Finally, Acehnese dance also offers performers in Jakarta an outlet for self-expression. With the freedom to modify their traditions as they saw fit, Acehnese dancers were able to explore new movements and adapt performances to meet their needs. For Nina, an Acehnese choreographer, dance offered a means to express her feelings about sensitive issues pertaining to Acehnese culture, including the status of women and the separatist conflict, without criticism from Acehnese society. In my own observations, however, most Acehnese dancers tried to stay within the rules of their traditions.

## ACEHNESE HIKAYAT IN JAKARTA

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<sup>488</sup> Winny, interview with author, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Kalau menurut aku, mungkin kalau Aceh itu tidak terlalu diperdulikannya, karena terlalu jauh mungkin, dari pusat kota, dari pusat pemerintahan, misalnya Jakarta...Tapi kalau ada tarian itu jadi setidaknya Aceh terjadi, jadi tampil kembali dan menghidupkan kembali nama Aceh, gitu. Jadi karena menurut aku itu sangat penting. Jadi secara tidak langsung kita memperkenalkan budaya kita ke orang, dan orang bahkan mengenali, ‘O ternyata Aceh itu bagus ini.’ Jadi mereka kan punya pandangan lain Aceh.*”

<sup>489</sup> Lia, email message to author, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Berkumpul, menghilangkan rasa kangen, motivasi, semangat, kekuatan, membuat kebersamaan.*”

In addition to Acehnese dance, the traditional theater practice of *hikayat* is also performed in Jakarta. However, *hikayat* does not enjoy the same popularity as the dances and audiences at *hikayat* performances are small. In this section, I explore the state of *hikayat* performance in Jakarta, including the modifications this practice has undergone outside of Aceh and how this has influenced the *hikayat* tradition.

### **Filling the Seats**

The best-known *hikayat* artist in Jakarta is Agus Nur Amal, who travels back and forth between Aceh and Jakarta, bringing his performances to both Acehnese and non-Acehnese audiences. In recent years, however, Agus has struggled to fill the seats at his performances, as the popularity of this traditional theater practice has declined. Agus explains, “in Aceh alone, *hikayat* is not popular anymore...Indeed for *hikayat* performers themselves, their lives are pulling them towards modern development.”<sup>490</sup> As I discussed in Chapter 3, this is partially due to the fact that *hikayat* performances are increasingly viewed on televisions and purchased as DVDs, which are expensive for performers to produce. However, the traditional art form is also unpopular in Jakarta, where live *hikayat* performances are more common. This could be due to the fact that Acehnese *hikayat* is not very well known by Indonesians, unlike the Saman, which received significant attention following the tsunami and has been taught in Jakarta schools. It may also be due to the fact that *hikayat* uses Acehnese language and history in its story-telling. Iwan Amir observed, “the story-performance genre is the most region-bound of any in Aceh. To my knowledge, no story-performers have ever been brought from Aceh to join in a cultural mission abroad...The problem is that the art form relies heavily on a knowledge of Acehnese language and literature, which cannot accommodate non-Acehnese speaking diaspora

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<sup>490</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 8, 2010. Indonesian: “Di Aceh sendiri, *hikayat* itu juga sudah tidak populer lagi...memang tokoh-tokoh penghikayat itu sendiri hidupnya menarik diri dari, pada perkembangan modern begitu.”

audience.”<sup>491</sup> For Agus, however, Acehese audiences also struggle to connect with his performances. Agus remarked, “ss for Acehese who live in Jakarta, it’s an Acehese society who are looking for money. An Acehese society of traders. Businessmen. They don’t really care so much about Acehese arts activities. I often created Acehese arts shows but none of them wanted to see it. That doesn’t mean that there aren’t any [at all]. There are [people who are interested], but it’s a small group.”<sup>492</sup>

As for the number of *hikayat* artists in Jakarta, Agus could count them on one hand. There were four *hikayat* performers that he knew of, all of them Acehese men, and they lived all over Jakarta, making regular collaboration difficult. Moreover, because there is no *hikayat* center and no institution where *hikayat* is formally taught, students who wish to study the traditional art form must seek out Jakarta’s *hikayat* professionals for private study. Agus was not aware of any such students, but he believed that it was possible for non-Acehese to learn and perform *hikayat*. Agus responded, “I think they can, they can [do it in] Indonesian language, and it can be translated later. Or, if they learn to speak Acehese. Because they’re telling a story. There’s a scenario, thus they can memorize it.”<sup>493</sup>

*Hikayat* performances are also open to both genders, but as mentioned in Chapter 2, it is rare to see Acehese women taking up this solo performance genre, as they are generally too shy or lack the confidence to perform in public.<sup>494</sup> Although Acehese women who wish to perform

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<sup>491</sup> Amir, “Sing, Adapt, Persevere,” 231.

<sup>492</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 8, 2010. Indonesian: “*Kalau masyarakat Aceh di Jakarta memang masyarakat Aceh yang, masyarakat Aceh cari uang. Begitu, ya? Masyarakat Aceh pedagang, begitu. Businessman. Mereka kurang peduli sama kegiatan kesenian Aceh. Saya sering buat acara-acara kesenian Aceh tapi tidak ada yang mau menonton mereka. Tidak ada yang mau nonton, begitu. Tapi bukan berarti tidak ada begitu, ya? Ada, tapi kelompok-kelompok kecil.*”

<sup>493</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 20, 2010. Indonesian: “*Saya kira bisa, baik dia berbahasa Indonesia, pasti diterjemahkan dulu ya? Atau dia belajar bahasa Aceh, begitu. Karena, dia cerita, ya? Ada skenario, jadi bisa dihafal begitu, bisa dihafal.*”

<sup>494</sup> For more on Acehese women’s reluctance to perform in public, see my discussion of the term “*malu*” in Chapter 2.

*hikayat* may find a more receptive audience in Jakarta than in Aceh, Agus's comments suggest that this audience would still be small. In this sense, Acehese female *hikayat* performers, while rare in Aceh, are non-existent in Jakarta.

### **Remaking Tradition**

Like Acehese traditional dances, *hikayat* in Jakarta has also undergone several changes in order to reach non-Acehnese audiences. Not only does Agus Nur Amal perform in the Indonesian language rather than in Acehese, but he has also altered the format of his performances. According to Iwan Amir, Agus's performances are structured as a series of jokes instead of a story, and "in several respects, Agus's performances on television bore little resemblance to the traditional Acehese practice of story-performing."<sup>495</sup> Despite these changes, however, Indonesians continue to portray Agus as a "traditional" artist, and for Iwan Amir, it is this idea of tradition that lends Agus the popularity he enjoys. Amir explains, "the media in Jakarta constantly present him as a person who 'promotes traditional culture'...His popularity in Jakarta—as well as among other Acehese artists in other major cities in Java—significantly improved in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster in Aceh, which he capitalized on by creating and performing the new *Hikayat Tsunami* or 'The Story of the Tsunami.'...It is crucial for his survival to maintain his image as a 'traditional performer'."<sup>496</sup>

For Agus, introducing new or modern elements into *hikayat* performance is the very reason that *hikayat* has survived for centuries. Bringing in material pertaining to the conflict, the tsunami, or even the weather, Agus finds that *hikayat* performances retain their traditional format while adapting to the demands of contemporary audiences. Not only is the content of *hikayat* stories flexible, but the function of *hikayat* is also subject to change. In the past, *hikayat*, as well

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<sup>495</sup> Amir, "Sing, Adapt, Persevere," 234.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid., 234-35.



as other Acehese traditional arts forms, functioned to spread Islam throughout Aceh. Today it can serve to entertain, to offer political commentary on current events, or, as Agus's performances have illustrated, to address trauma experienced by survivors of the conflict and the tsunami in Aceh. Regardless of these changes, however, for Agus, the most important function of *hikayat* today is to educate Acehese about their cultural traditions and values. Agus explains, "what is the importance of *hikayat* performers now? Definitely to reintroduce a knowledge of Acehese traditions, for Acehese society of this era... People of our time don't know *hikayat* anymore. Thus, the importance of *hikayat* at this time is to re-introduce Acehese cultural values."<sup>497</sup>

## CONCLUSION

For Acehese who have traveled to Jakarta as well as non-Acehese living in the nation's capital, there are a variety of opportunities to interact with Acehese performance. At a professional level, students can earn an arts degree from the prestigious Jakarta Arts Institute, studying Acehese dance and music with Pak Uki. Individuals can also perform in informal dance troupes, which are plentiful due to the popularity of the Saman dance, or attend performances at either Acehese-organized or national events. Though there are few opportunities to learn *hikayat* in Jakarta, Acehese can interact with this arts form by attending performances given by Agus Nur Amal, Pondok Gede, or Mustafa Kamal, *hikayat* performers who are based in Jakarta.

Jakarta also offers an open environment for Acehese who wish to experiment with traditional arts forms and produce their own choreographies. Not only are there more

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<sup>497</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 8, 2010. Indonesian: "Apa pentingnya penghikayat saat ini? Pasti memperkenalkan kembali ilmu pengetahuan adat dan istiadat Aceh untuk masyarakat Aceh zaman sekarang...Orang zaman sekarang tidak tahu lagi hikayatnya. Jadi pentingnya hikayat saat ini adalah memperkenalkan kembali nilai-nilai budaya Aceh."

performance opportunities in Jakarta than in Aceh, but in Jakarta there are also fewer restrictions on arts performances. Mixing men and women in traditionally all-female or all-male dances, for example, allows a greater number of individuals to participate and gives performers more control over their performances. Although the development of Acehese dance in Jakarta has enabled this arts form to reach a wider audience, some Acehese artists are concerned that the transformation of their traditions has caused Acehese to lose sight of what their traditions “really” are.

With the availability of Acehese dance courses, instructors, and performance events, Jakarta emerges an ideal place to study, perform, and observe Acehese dance. However, my research shows that few Acehese are able to take advantage of the performance opportunities Jakarta has to offer. Most Acehese in Jakarta are male students who are aware that their primary responsibility in Jakarta is to further their education and land a decent job. Competing with other Indonesians for these same positions, most Acehese in Jakarta do not have time to manage informal dance troupes or to study dance at an advanced level. Acehese women face additional barriers. Because Acehese society discourages women from studying abroad, there are fewer Acehese women in the diaspora. Those who are able to travel to Jakarta and to join an informal dance troupe tend to lack confidence in their performances, which causes feelings of nervousness and anxiety about making mistakes.

Importantly, both Acehese males and females continue to feel that their performance traditions hold personal significance for them. For many students, participating in and even observing Acehese performance offers a means to support Aceh and spread awareness about the region to other Indonesians. Acehese dance also offers another “Acehese-friendly” space where diasporans can connect with one another and make friends with non-Acehese who are

interested in Acehnese culture. In this way, even though Acehnese women have little opportunity to study at IKJ and may feel nervous during performances, they can still benefit from participating in performance activities, which offer a space for socializing and for creative expression.

The next chapter takes a closer look at the benefits of Acehnese performance for performers by examining the “behind the scenes” site of rehearsal spaces. These spaces, which tend to be free of judgment or evaluation, are important places for dancers to form close bonds and to experiment with body movements that they would not ordinarily perform for a public audience. In addition, rehearsals are often all-female or all-male spaces, which can give dancers a greater sense of intimacy with their peers.

## CHAPTER 5

### Notes from Backstage

*“I discovered a long time ago that for me to live is to dance. Not on a stage but in a room inside myself. I don’t have a sense of whether that room has walls or not, but it’s a retreat, a place where nobody else can go.”*<sup>498</sup>

Three days before I was scheduled to return to Los Angeles from doing fieldwork in Indonesia I received a text message from Debra Yatim, an Acehnese women’s rights activist and scholar. The text said: “Hi Kimberly, I just met a friend from UNIFEM in Aceh. They’re doing a drive to establish Women’s Centers in several *kabupaten* [districts]. One of the big things the village women requested is help forming dance classes!”<sup>499</sup>

The following day I met with Debra to learn more about the UNIFEM program and the Acehnese women’s request. Debra explained that *balai inong*, or “women’s centers,” used to be common in Aceh, offering village women an opportunity to meet and discuss their local problems.<sup>500</sup> According to UNIFEM, “‘Women’s Houses’ are traditionally found in every village in the province, and provide a secure forum in which women can come together to network, discuss their needs and conduct joint projects.”<sup>501</sup> As a result of the conflict, however, women were afraid to venture out at night and attendance at these local meetings dwindled. The tsunami further reduced women’s opportunities to meet at the *balai inong*, as many of these safe spaces were swept away. Debra informed me that UNIFEM has attempted to rebuild some of these Women’s Centers since the peace agreement was signed, but addressing the grievances of conflict-affected families and providing immediate shelter for tsunami victims took precedence. “Now, in 2010, they are finally able to get this project going,” she said. “And when they asked

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<sup>498</sup> Ayu Utami, *Saman*, trans. Pamela Allen (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2005), 119.

<sup>499</sup> Debra Yatim, text message to author, May 27, 2010.

<sup>500</sup> Not to be confused with *inong bale*, GAM’s battalion of female fighters.

<sup>501</sup> UNIFEM, “Aceh Tsunami Response” (July 2005), 3.

the women what they wanted to include in their Women's Centers, the women said they wanted dance classes."<sup>502</sup>

My previous chapters have suggested that Acehese dance and other traditional Acehese performance practices have not been particularly welcoming for Acehese women. While the conflict, the tsunami, and the implementation of *syariah* law stifled development of the performing arts in Aceh, social attitudes and expectations for women tend to center around family and career responsibilities, thus limiting the kinds of recreational activities in which Acehese women take part. Women are also discouraged from pursuing Acehese dance professionally, since most opportunities for studying and performing Acehese dance at a professional level require students to travel outside of Aceh and, as I explored in Chapter 4, Acehese girls and women are often unable to travel abroad. In addition, I suggested that most creative experimentation with Acehese performance traditions has taken place outside of Aceh, and that those Acehese dancers who have become choreographers rarely return to Aceh, claiming that their *kreasi baru* (new creations) would not be well received. If Acehese society discourages women from participating in dance activities and restricts the kinds of dance creations that can be performed, why would Acehese women today have any desire to learn Acehese dance? Where did this desire come from? And what do they hope to get out of these classes?

In order to address these questions, this chapter will examine Acehese performance from a relatively unexplored perspective. Rather than focusing on performance activities that are designed specifically for the purpose of addressing trauma, or professional performance opportunities available for communities outside of Aceh, this chapter takes a closer look at the

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<sup>502</sup> Debra Yatim, text message to author, May 28, 2010.

dynamics of Acehnese dance rehearsals. Rehearsals are informal meetings in which individuals gather to *practice* rather than to *perform* dances. In practicing, individuals are able to experiment with different movement combinations, to make mistakes, and to joke around. In contrast, performances require individuals to have attained a certain level of skill and to showcase their skills without error for a discriminating audience. Examining the ways in which individuals *practice* rather than *perform* dance offers insight into the diverse experiences that dancers can have when interacting with their performance traditions.

The first section of this chapter gives a detailed account of my observations of Acehnese dance rehearsals in various parts of Indonesia, including Aceh, Yogyakarta, and Jakarta, as well as a rehearsal I attended in Sydney, Australia. These observations aim to familiarize readers with the ways in which dance rehearsals are structured, the group dynamics of the rehearsals, and the significance of these rehearsals to performers. The second section takes my analysis of rehearsal spaces one step further by focusing on a teen theater workshop held in Los Angeles, California. Though this workshop, which is founded upon Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed methodologies, differs from Acehnese dance rehearsals in many ways, my observations suggest that many of the same benefits of participating in this theater workshop can also be found in Acehnese dance rehearsals. Finally, in offering a comparison between the Acehnese dance rehearsals I observed in Indonesia and Australia and the teen theater workshops I observed in California, I hope to emphasize the specific elements of rehearsal spaces that make them meaningful to performers, particularly Acehnese women. By focusing on rehearsal spaces, I aim to arrive at a more nuanced analysis of how the arts can serve as a "tactic" for trauma survivors.

## **ACEHNESE DANCE REHEARSALS**

In order to better understand the significance of Acehese dance rehearsals to performers and, more specifically, why Acehese women today would want to include dance classes as a part of their *balai inong*, I offer in this section my observations of Acehese dance rehearsals that I have witnessed and/or participated in. I also include a description of my own experience learning Acehese dance, which allows me to reflect upon the significance of rehearsals as an actor, rather than an observer alone. I conclude this section with notes from Pak Uki's dance class at the Jakarta Arts Institute (IKJ). Because these are university classes, in which students are evaluated for their work, they offer an interesting comparison to the more informal dance sessions I have observed and highlight important distinctions between Acehese dance rehearsals and Acehese dance performances. The following observations focus upon the relationships among dancers, the dancers' physical movements and experimentations, the dancers' attitudes towards rehearsing, and the general atmosphere of the rehearsals.

### **Aceh, Indonesia**

During a trip to Aceh in August 2009, I had the opportunity to witness a rehearsal held by the Seulaweuet dance troupe in Banda Aceh. Seulaweuet is the largest dance troupe in Aceh with approximately one hundred active members who hail from all over Aceh and who must audition in order to be accepted into the troupe. The dancers usually perform in groups of 12-15 males or females at festivals and holiday celebrations within Aceh. However, they have also had opportunities to perform in other countries. The first time I saw Seulaweuet perform was at a conference at the University of Manoa in Hawaii in October 2009. Seulaweuet has also performed in Malaysia (2004 and 2005), in Singapore (2007), and in Beijing for the 2008 Olympics. Most recently, in July 2010, they performed in Shanghai.

Though Seulaweuet members range in age from their early teens to late forties, the most active members tend to be male and female college students or recent college graduates. These young men and women have considerable experience in Acehese dance and some eventually become dance instructors. At the Seulaweuet rehearsal that I observed, thirteen young men (ages 17-25) were preparing for a performance at Taman Sari, a large cultural park in Banda Aceh. The dancers had been asked to perform a 15-minute *Rapa'i Geleng* set during a product-launching event that took place at Taman Sari from 4:00 to 10:00 PM. In addition to Seulaweuet, an all-female traditional dance troupe and several (all-male) rock bands performed throughout the evening.

The Seulaweuet members met at one of the dancer's houses at 12:45 PM on the day of their performance. There they ate lunch, chatted with one another, and entertained several friends (both male and female) who were also dancers, but did not belong to the Seulaweuet dance troupe. After about an hour of eating, drinking, smoking, and chatting in Acehese, they picked up their costumes, which lay in a box in the kitchen, and headed to Taman Sari. Their performance was scheduled for 2:00 PM.

When the Seulaweuet members arrived at Taman Sari, at approximately 1:45, they set up their instruments by the restrooms, located at the back of the park in a covered area with a marble floor. They spent about ten minutes getting dressed, which consisted not only of changing into shiny red and gold costumes, but also involved putting on make-up, dabbing cream and powder on their faces, and slicking their hair back with gel. Then the dancers spent another twenty minutes rehearsing with their instruments. They sat on their knees in a line on the floor in between the male and female restrooms. One of the troupe members, who was positioned in the middle of the line, acted as the *syeh*, leading the others in the vocal and drumming parts. The



dancers performed a series of interlocking movements by bowing, swaying, and rising up on their knees, but never standing up. They continued to drum and to sing while performing these movements. During this rehearsal they performed the dances slowly, and only started from the beginnings of each piece. At one point, I asked one of the dancers how many times they had rehearsed this set in preparation for this particular performance. He looked at me quizzically and asked me to repeat the question. Then he laughed and said, “This is the first time!” He explained later that they had performed these dances so many times they hardly needed to rehearse.



**Sulawueit Rehearsal at Taman Sari (Aceh, Indonesia 2009)**

At 2:30 the boys walked over to the stage area located toward the north end of the park. The dancer who had acted as the *syeh* went to inform the event organizers that they were ready to perform. While they waited, the rest of the dancers joked around with each other and sang their vocal parts. Ten minutes later the *syeh* returned. He told everyone there had been a misunderstanding, that they were actually supposed to perform at 7:30, and that he was going

back home to play soccer if anyone wanted to join. The troupe members then changed out of their costumes, hopped onto their motorbikes, and sped off toward the nearest soccer field. They did not return to Taman Sari until a little after 8:00, at which point they changed into their costumes again and rehearsed briefly. At 8:30 the dancers performed their ten-minute set. Then, they all went home.

### **Sydney, Australia**

Alfira O'Sullivan, an Acehnese-Australian woman in her late-twenties, started an Acehnese dance troupe in Sydney, Australia, called *Suara Indonesia* ("Indonesia's Voice"). The dancers rehearse every Sunday afternoon and more frequently if they have an upcoming performance. Most of the dancers are non-Acehnese, but many are Indonesians who have experience in other forms of Indonesian dance and want to expand their repertoire. The rehearsals are also open to individuals who have no dance experience but are interested in learning Acehnese dance.

In July 2009 I attended one of *Suara Indonesia's* rehearsals. The rehearsal took place in a dance studio with mirrors taking up the front and back walls. It started a few minutes after 1:00 PM and lasted one and a half hours. At this particular rehearsal there were eight women ages 20-25 and one Australian woman in her mid-forties. Two of the younger women sat against the wall and did not participate in the dance activities, but provided the verses to the songs while the dancers sang the chorus. There was only one male in the room (age 24) who also did not participate as a dancer, but provided occasional drumming.



**Suara Indonesia Rehearsal (Sydney, Australia 2009)**

Though Alfira frequently asked for the group’s input, she appeared to be the “leader” of the troupe and was in charge of conducting the rehearsals. The first dance they practiced involved kneeling in a line and moving in an interlocking pattern. Alfira invited me to join in the line of dancers and assume their position, placing my arms over the shoulders of the individuals on either side of me. As the singing and drumming began, we then practiced coordinating our movements, occasionally looking up to the mirror to make sure we were doing it correctly. Having never performed Acehnese dance before, I was surprised by how difficult it was to execute all of the different moves at the right time. For example, while bowing and turning my

head turned to the right, I was also expected to reach my right arm over and shake the hand of the person to my left. At the next beat, I stood up on my knees, reached my left arm over the person to my right, who was bowing, and shook the hand of the person to *her* right, who, like me, was standing on her knees. Though we started out practicing these moves slowly, they eventually got faster and faster. I soon realized that forgetting which direction to turn or which hand to stretch out could easily cause a dancer to hit, or to get hit by, a fellow dancer.

For the most part such mistakes were avoided. However, the dancers did get confused about the singing parts and the sequence of the movements within a dance. When they made a mistake, the girls would laugh and help one another remember the patterns. Sometimes they debated which movement pattern came next in the dances. They resolved these issues together and no one in the group, not even Alfira, had the final say. Instead, they came to an agreement upon which version looked or felt best. They took one or two short breaks for water, but mostly worked on preparing their dances for an upcoming performance. The rehearsal ended at 2:30 PM.

### **Yogyakarta, Indonesia**

During a brief visit to Yogyakarta in May 2010, I had the opportunity to observe an Acehese dance rehearsal at the Cut Nyack Dhien dorm for female Acehese students. Of the twenty women residing in the dorm, seven attended the Sunday evening rehearsal. According to Redy, who recently graduated from one of the Islamic universities in Yogya and serves as the dance instructor, they rehearse once a week on Sundays, but meet more frequently if there is an upcoming performance. The dancers all have different levels of experience. While some, like Redy, had taken dance lessons in Aceh since they were young, others had taken up Acehese dance only upon arriving in Yogyakarta, where they discovered Redy's informal group.

The rehearsal began around 5:15 PM in a large recreation room where two guys were playing ping-pong. The girls sat on a small stage in the back of the room, following a female *syeh* and a male drummer. Neither the *syeh* nor the drummer participated in the dances. When I asked Redy if she was required to have a female *syeh*, since the dance they performed was an all-female one, she said that they had had a male *syeh* in the past, but the girls didn't really like the sound of his voice. They felt that the female *syeh*'s voice was a better match for their movements.

When I introduced myself to the group, the girls looked at each other nervously and apologized to me, claiming that their dancing would not be very good since this was just a rehearsal, not a "serious" performance. I assured them that I wasn't there to judge them, and after a few minutes they seemed to relax. The girls rehearsed several different dances, including a version of *Saman*, the *Tarek Pukat* dance, and a few others. They sat on their knees in a line facing Redy, who sang and led them by miming the movements. When they made mistakes, Redy would correct them, or simply call out the girl's name to indicate that she had messed up. Usually whoever messed up responded by smiling sheepishly or giggling. After performing with the drummer for about twenty minutes, the drummer left and they continued without any breaks. Forty-five minutes into the rehearsal, the girls looked tired. Redy took drink orders and sent one of the dancers to order drinks. They continued the rehearsal for another fifteen minutes or so, then dispersed. Most of the girls went back to their rooms to study or to pray.

**Jakarta, Indonesia**

***April 9, 2010***

In Jakarta I had the pleasure of observing several different dance troupes' rehearsals. One group, which consisted of twelve non-Acehnese women, most of whom were alumni from IKJ, was preparing for a performance in Bali the following week and an "Indonesia Cultural

Promotion” show at the United Arab Emirates Consulate in several weeks. They held their rehearsal in one of the dance studios at IKJ at 7:30 PM on Friday, April 9, 2010. In addition to the twelve women and a few female friends who had come to watch, Pak Uki was there, providing the main vocal parts and giving advice when it was requested.

For both of these performances, the dancers had decided to perform a variety of Indonesian dances, including the Javanese Srimpi dance, the Balinese Legong dance, and a set of three Acehnese dances. The three Acehnese dances had been combined into one 15-minute set; the dancers thus spent a large part of the rehearsal figuring out how to seamlessly transition from the standing dances to *Saman Sin*, a sitting dance. All of the women were in their early twenties. One of them, Yuyun, seemed to be the leader. She took on the responsibility of playing the appropriate recorded music for each of the dances, and from time to time she called out to the dancers, critiquing their moves. She would also jump into the rehearsal and physically correct the dancers’ postures.

As I watched the troupe rehearse all of their dances, including the Balinese and Javanese ones, I noticed that the set of Acehnese dances was the only set that involved all of the dancers. For the Balinese dances, for example, only five of the women performed while the others sat in the back corner of the room, eating, drinking tea, and chatting with one another. The Acehnese dance was also the only dance that did not include recorded music, as the women sang in a call-and-response fashion with Pak Uki, and provided their own body percussion. The women told me that it had been a while since they had performed Acehnese dance, and throughout the rehearsal, several of the performers needed to be reminded of the lyrics. However, I noticed that there were very few movement-related mistakes and over all, the dances looked polished.

Although the set of Acehese dances, performed from beginning to end without starting over, lasted approximately fifteen minutes, the women spent at least forty-five minutes rehearsing the Acehese dances within their two and a half-hour rehearsal. Having observed the entire rehearsal session, I noticed that the women seemed to be most exhausted after performing the Acehese set. These were by far the most active dances they performed, as the women were in constant motion, simultaneously clapping, singing, and concentrating on the position of their arms (spread out or tucked into their chests, lifted to the sky or stretched flat on the floor) and legs (kneeling or standing, bowing or rising). When they had finished the Acehese set, almost all of the women were dripping with sweat and they rushed to grab drinks and to wipe themselves off with towels. During one of their breaks I asked Yuyun which dance she thought was the most difficult to perform of all the dances they had included. Without hesitation she responded “*Saman*.”

This rehearsal was one of the more serious dance rehearsals I have observed. Though the women were all friendly with one another, they tended to restrict their chatting and joking around for the breaks; when dancing, the women were focused and professional. I also noticed that all of the women had a say in determining their stage positions and their transitions from one dance to the next. At one point, for example, the women discussed how they should begin the dance. Several different women offered their ideas. These ideas were then tested and the dancers offered their feedback. Only when they had reached a consensus did they move forward with the rehearsal. In this way, although Uki and Yuyun provided advice regarding singing and dancing technique, the group operated democratically, with each dancer having an opportunity to share her opinions and suggestions.

***May 22, 2010***

I also attended several rehearsals of the Walet Dance Troupe, who are also non-Acehnese women alumni of IKJ. These women are in their mid-twenties to late forties, and some had brought their children to the rehearsal. One of the rehearsals was held from 5:00 to 8:00 PM on the third floor of IKJ and served as preparation for a performance for a Chinese-Indonesian student reunion event. In addition to the fourteen women and four children, Pak Uki and a man named Djoko, who was one of the dancers' husbands and the stage manager for the Walet dance troupe, were also present.

As in the previous rehearsal I mentioned, Pak Uki's main role was to lead the women in the call-and-response style singing, to remind them of the lyrics, and, on occasion, to correct their movements. However, Pak Uki also found himself trying to get the women to settle down or to focus on the dance. From 5:00 to 5:30, for example, Uki tried to call the women together so they could begin the rehearsal, but most of them were busy catching up, eating and drinking, and playing with the kids. Two women didn't arrive until after 5:30. The rehearsal finally began at 5:45.

Though Uki told me that these women danced regularly in various kinds of performances held in Jakarta, they seemed a little rusty in recalling the Acehnese dances and songs. A few women became confused at certain points during the rehearsal and looked around for help. I noticed that if only one woman was confused, she was usually able to find her way back into the dance and continue as if the mistake had never been made. But if two or more women lost their place in the dance, the whole group was affected and Uki would have to stop and start them over. Uki's corrections focused on nuances within the vocal parts and the overall "flow" of the dance. On numerous occasions he gave instructions about how to perform the movements so that they flowed with the beat, which did not always follow a regular pulse. In a previous interview, Uki



had mentioned to me that the counting system had infiltrated Acehnese dance rehearsals to a degree that performers came to rely on these hard and fast beats rather than intuitively interpreting the tempo of the piece and pacing their movements accordingly. This point was made obvious to me during this rehearsal. Though Uki tried to explain to the dancers how the movement was supposed to flow from one tempo to the next, the women continued to perform the piece without this nuance and eventually Uki moved on.

Despite providing these corrections and trying to get the women to focus, Uki never really emerged as the “leader” of the troupe. As with the other Jakartan women rehearsing Acehnese dance, the Walet dancers were attempting to combine several different dances into one fifteen-minute performance. As a result, there was some debate as to how to transition from one dance to the next. They were also experimenting with different patterns, moving from a single line, to a circle, to a V-pattern, and so on. At least four different women voiced their opinions about how the transitions should go and suggested a particular formation, which the dancers then tried out. During these debates, Uki often remained quiet, allowing the women to debate among themselves. Sometimes he would look over at me and shrug, as if to say, “I have no idea how this will turn out, but we’ll just have to wait and see!” Other times he approached Djoko, who had his own suggestions regarding the women’s formations, but like Uki, he did not have the final say.

At 7:00 the women took a long break. They all looked exhausted and sat with their legs stretched out, complaining that their knees and feet hurt. During the break, Uki told me that these dancers have performed all of these moves before, but not necessarily in this particular combination. Moreover, they do not have regular rehearsals. Instead, they only rehearse when they are invited to perform at a specific event, usually once a month or once every two months.

After the break, the dancers went through their routine from beginning to end. This time the women looked focused and seemed to be giving it their all. They practiced moving from a standing dance to a sitting dance, and from this seated position they scooted together to form a row. As the tempo increased in the final dance, a few women let out a trilling sound, characteristic of Acehnese dance. When the dance ended, they all collapsed onto the floor and let out sighs of exhaustion. Many of them were sweating.

Of all the Acehnese dance rehearsals I have witnessed, this was by far the most chaotic. For the first hour of the rehearsal, the women had to compete with the loud music streaming into their room from across the hall, where another dance rehearsal was taking place. When this other rehearsal was over, a group of older men entered the women's rehearsal room carrying in large instruments and setting them up loudly in one corner of the room. In addition to these distractions, the women were also pulled away from the rehearsal by the four kids who were constantly running around, screaming and hitting each other, banging on the *gamelan* sets in the other corners of the room, and begging their moms for attention. I noticed that Djoko, who was the father of two of the children, took no responsibility for their actions. As a result, their mother frequently had to leave her position in the group to take care of the kids. Sometimes the kids would wander over to their mothers and try to sit in their laps or pull them out of the line while the women were in the middle of an interlocking movement. This made it difficult for the rest of the group to complete the movement pattern, and they would often have to start from the beginning.

### **Jakarta Arts Institute: Pak Uki's Dance Class**

In addition to these dance rehearsals, I also observed twelve Acehnese dance classes at IKJ. These class sessions differed from the other rehearsals I observed in that there was a clear

division between “instructor” and “student,” and the students were being evaluated for the effort they put in during the class time. Moreover, the students were not there specifically out of a desire to learn Acehnese dance; instead, they were taking the class as a requirement for earning their degrees in dance performance. Despite these distinctions, my observations suggest that the class still offered a relatively relaxed atmosphere for the seven women (ages 19-23) to experiment with Acehnese dance movements together. What follows are my observations from six different class sessions.

*April 7, 2010*

Wednesday, 10:00 AM. I arrived at a large dance classroom on the second floor of IKJ. The room had wooden floors and mirrored walls at the front and back of the room. There were six girls sitting on the floor chatting, smoking, and singing Acehnese lyrics from a dance they had been learning. A few of them also had their laptops open and were checking their Facebook accounts. I introduced myself to the girls and asked if it would be all right if I observed their dance classes. They said it was fine with them, but were curious as to why anyone would want to watch their class. I told them about my research and they seemed interested. I told them at some point I might want to ask them more about their experiences learning Acehnese dance, if it was all right with them. They all looked at one another and giggled. “You can ask us, but we’re not experts!” one of the taller girls replied. Another one chimed in, “This is our first time learning Acehnese dance. I’m afraid we won’t be much help!” Later, I asked all of them for their Facebook addresses, which they were happy to give. It is worth noting that Facebook added a new dimension to my research that I had not expected. Not only was it easier to reach the girls through Facebook, as opposed to email and in some cases text messages, but it also gave the girls a chance to respond to my questions whenever it was most convenient for them. In

addition, because I was their friend on Facebook, they were able to find out information about me, which helped to dismantle the power dynamics inherent within an “interviewer/interviewee” relationship.

Around 10:20 AM Pak Uki strolled into the room and waved to me as if there was nothing unusual about an unknown American woman sitting in the corner of his class in the middle of the semester. After he changed into less formal attire, I explained my research to him and asked if I could sit in on his classes. “Of course!” he replied. “Later, I will bring some DVDs for you about Acehnese dance.” He spent another ten minutes talking to me about Acehnese dance and informed me that they were currently studying *Seudati*. Then he politely excused himself so he could begin the class.

The class started a little after 10:30. Uki stood in the front of the room with his back to the mirrors, facing the girls. He counted rhythmically to eight, at which point all the dancers began to swing their arms and step in unison. Clearly, the girls were already familiar with this particular dance, but occasionally one or two girls got her footwork or arm movement wrong. When this happened, Uki approached the student who made a mistake and gave her a friendly pretend slap, indicating which aspect of the dance she had gotten wrong. For example, when Ressa made a mistake with her footwork, Uki ceased counting, walked over towards her, and pinched her ankle, reprimanding, “*Kakinya salah!*” (Wrong foot!) Ressa then giggled, or pretended to cower while apologizing. Often, they made fun of themselves and laughed with their friends.

The overall atmosphere of the dance class was light-hearted and fun rather than tense or competitive. The girls were all friendly with one another, and bursts of laughter erupted throughout the class. But in addition to their joking, they also worked hard. At one point I

realized that there was one movement for almost every beat in the song, meaning that they were constantly moving and coordinating their arms and legs, hips and shoulders, and judging their distance from their partners so as to maintain their formation. That said, the girls took frequent breaks, which lasted anywhere from 1-10 minutes. By the end of the class, all the girls were sweating, and one lay prostrate on the floor. (I should add that I was also sweating. With no AC and no fans in the classroom, the room was at least ninety-five degrees.) During one of the breaks, I asked Putry if the *Seudati* dance was difficult to learn. She said yes, it required a lot of energy. I had noticed that she was the most energetic of the girls, and seemed to be putting 100% into the rehearsal. Others performed the movements well, but seemed to have less energy, or less interest, in the dance.

Toward the end of the class, Uki had them run through their routine a few more times from beginning to end without stopping. During their second run-through, a cat jumped through the window and ran across the dance floor. No one noticed or stopped dancing. At 11:20 they sat in a circle while Uki discussed their final exam and handed out an attendance sheet. Class was dismissed at 11:30.



**Pak Uki's Acehese Dance Class (Jakarta, Indonesia 2010)**

***April 8, 2010***

At 12:00 noon I waited outside the dance class. I was told that this class met from 12:00 – 2:00, but I didn't see any of the girls until Ressa appeared at 12:30. She led me into the class, where Uki was talking on his phone. He asked her where everyone else was; she shrugged. In the next 5-10 minutes, the rest of the class trickled in. Lis said she was feeling sick. She sat by the side of the room while the others warmed up. They performed the opening of the *Seudati* dance that they had practiced the day before. Uki had them do this opening segment several times. When they messed up, he looked over at me and smiled, shaking his head.

By 1:00 there were five girls present. As they went over one of the newer parts of the dance, they got confused about which direction to turn. Uki showed them the footwork several

times and had them imitate him, but a few of the girls were still lost. Then Uki grew impatient. He told them that if they didn't come to class prepared individually, they wouldn't be able to perform the dance collectively. He had them repeat the same set of moves at least eight times, with many stops and starts. They also practiced moving into a faster tempo, which pulled the rhythm outside of the 4/4 clapping Uki was providing. He sang to give them structure, but they had a hard time following the changing beat. Uki began to focus on the girls one at a time. He paid particular attention to Ressa, who, I noticed, had been performing the moves half-heartedly. He told her to lift her leg higher, to bring her foot down harder, to put more emphasis on the turns; in short, he told her to give it all she had. The other girls looked tired and disinterested. The room felt even hotter than the day before, and Rizky opened the door to get the air flowing.

While the girls took a break, Uki looked over at them and called to each one individually. "Ressa," he called. "*Banyak salah!*" (A lot of mistakes!) She nodded, looked at the floor. Everyone was exhausted. Uki called them back to the dance floor and had them go through the dance from beginning to end a few times. At 1:30 they met in a circle in the middle of the room. Uki passed out the attendance sheet and told them that "it" (the class, the dance, the learning process) doesn't work unless everyone is present. He asked Lis if she still felt sick. "Yes, dizzy. In pain." In the spirit of a pep talk, he told her that this was all in her head, that her problems were more mental than physical, and that she just needed the right attitude to be able to perform the dance steps. This advice was not directed at Lis alone, however; Uki looked at all the girls while he spoke and they nodded. Then they dispersed.

*April 14, 2010*

The 10:00 class started at 10:40. Uki handed me five DVDs about the tsunami and Acehese dance. Then he told the girls (all six were present) that they were going to learn a new dance, *Saman Sin*. They looked excited and bounced onto the dance floor.

First he taught them a hand movement, which involved stretching the arms out and turning the hands in while twisting the wrists. It also required the dancers to jut their hips out. As Uki demonstrated, the girls giggled and mimicked him, exaggerating the movement. “Like this, Pak?” Gabby asked. She rolled her hips and thrust her hands out, causing everyone to laugh, including Uki. They continued to work on this move in the context of the rest of the dance, and laughed whenever they made a mistake. Another part of the dance demanded that they go up and down in unison while clapping. Two of the girls had trouble coordinating their ups and downs with the rest of the group. As they rehearsed, Uki stood back and watched, letting them try it without his counting, but two of the girls continued to get confused. At one point Putry took charge and helped these girls individually. Then they ran through the section on their own, determined to get it right.

At 11:00 Uki got a phone call and the dancers decided to take a break. They resumed their rehearsal at 11:15, when Uki began to teach them a new part. In this segment, the girls had to bow down and revolve their heads while clapping. Uki explained that this part of the dance was supposed to look like controlled chaos; when it was up to speed, the head-revolving would look wild and untamed, and yet it was to be performed in unison by each member. The girls had trouble performing the move in unison and, realizing they weren’t getting it, began to shake their heads spastically. At one point, Gabby shook her head like a punk rocker, which elicited much laughter from the class. “No, no, not like this!” Uki cried, imitating Gabby. The girls found this hilarious. When he had them go through it again, he laughed at Ressa, claiming she was not



revolving her head enough, while Gabby was revolving her head too much. “It’s all about balance,” he informed them. As they continued to work through the dance, and as they continued to mess up, Uki approached them individually and gave the mistake-maker a light punch on the shoulder. The mistake-maker then cried out in frustration, “I know, I know! Sorry!” or “Argh! I’ll get it next time!” At 11:45 they met in a circle and Uki handed out the attendance sheet.

***April 15, 2010***

When I walked into the classroom at 12:20, all six girls were there and five of them were going over the movements they had learned the day before. They were still amused by the head-turning movement, and started to goof around, gyrating their butts to the beat. Lis lay on the floor with her hand over her head. The others were laughing and further exaggerating the movement. At one point Gabby approached Lis and attempted to pull her up. “Come on, *semangat!*” (Look alive!) she called. When Uki entered, the girls continued their rehearsal, but with a much more serious attitude. He watched them and stepped in when they got confused. Everyone seemed to have a lot of energy, except Lis, who sat out.

At 12:40 a seventh girl joined the class. She seemed to know all the moves and the lyrics already. After practicing this section a few times, the girls then met in the corner to go over the song lyrics. Uki repeated that this dance was called *Saman Sin* and he explained the meaning of the lyrics. Then he sang the lyrics, one stanza at a time, so the girls could write it down. There was no blackboard in the classroom, so all of the dancers created their own spellings. Two girls recorded Uki singing it so they could remember the tune. They spent about thirty-five minutes going over the lyrics and understanding where the lyrics fit with the movements they had already learned. I discovered that the seventh girl who had joined the class today took this class with

Uki last semester, which was why she was already familiar with the movements and lyrics. She helped the girls as they tried to incorporate the singing sections with the dance, but she left at 1:10.

The girls practiced combining the dance with the lyrics for the rest of the class. I noticed that each time they performed the set, the singing was in a different key, and since Uki started the song, the girls had to be prepared to match whatever key he started off in. However, the girls were not trained in singing and many of them were unable to match his key. In fact, a few of the girls seemed to have no idea of whether or not they were matching his key. As a result, the singing did not sound particularly good and they seemed to be aware of this. Nevertheless, Uki encouraged them not to be shy with the singing, and argued that even if they were confused about the lyrics (which they all picked up rather quickly), they should still sing as loud as they could. This resulted in a lot of strained voices, and laughter when the girls realized that they were not producing a desirable sound. They made fun of each other and themselves, and they started to get loud and rambunctious. Uki tried to settle them down so they could continue with the lesson, but the girls were jumping around and singing in their ugliest voices—perhaps intentionally. After several minutes of this Uki stood still with his arms crossed. He waited for the girls’ attention. Then he gave them a short lecture about taking the dance seriously. “Of course you can have fun,” he told them, “but you also have to learn the dance. You can’t learn if you’re goofing around.” The girls then settled down and became more focused. They took a short break, then ran through the dance a few times. I noticed that they all seemed to have gotten the basic moves down already—moves that they learned just yesterday. At 1:30 the attendance sheet was passed around and the girls said good-bye to each other.

*May 12, 2010*

The class began promptly at 10:10. Uki told the students they were going to go over the *Saman Sin*, which they hadn't practiced in several weeks, adding new variations to it. He helped the girls go over the transition from a slower part to a faster part of the *Saman Sin* dance and told them that they must memorize the lyrics. The girls seemed to have the most trouble with the fast part. Uki had them perform it in pairs, then all together, then slowly, then up to speed. He worked with them individually as well. Once they mastered this, he had them perform the same moves in pairs, facing one another. While the girls took a break, Uki told me he was trying to wean them off his counting system, because eventually they will have to be guided by the *rasa* (feeling) alone.

As the class continued, some of the girls became comfortable with the movements and even let out a *krrrrrrrrrrrrah* trill during the faster parts. Uki encouraged this and seemed to be pleased with their progress. At 11:00 they met in the center for a group chat. Uki told them that they are now studying the dance at an advanced level, and they can no longer rely on the counting. He also talked about the relationship between singing and dancing and asked if there were any questions. The girls shook their heads. Then he had them each perform the beginning of the dance on their own. The girls were mostly nervous when they started—they hesitated and tried to find the right note, and laughed because they thought their vocals sounded bad. He told them not to worry about the sound, but to sing loudly and to be strong. Later, he helped them work on their dynamics, explaining that the singing should not remain at the same volume throughout the song. When he gave an example of how the singing should *not* sound, the girls all laughed and pointed at one another, as if to say, “Ha! That’s what *you* sounded like!” This was all done in jest, of course, and no one seemed offended.

They practiced the variations at different speeds for the remainder of the class, and signed the attendance sheet at 11:20. At about the same time, a young man entered the classroom and asked to speak with Uki. I later found out that he was a senior at IKJ and had taken Pak Uki's Acehnese dance class a few years ago, but was interested in taking it again. While they talked, the girls did gymnastics against the wall and checked their Facebook accounts. They told me there would be no class tomorrow because it was a holiday.

***May 26, 2010***

I arrived at 10:05 AM. Uty sat on the floor in front of her laptop, playing an Indonesian pop song on YouTube. Lis filmed Gabby and Ferah, who were lip-syncing and singing into their water bottles along with the song. Rizky sat against the wall watching, while Putry stretched and practiced the dance moves by herself. The girls continued their karaoke, laughing and acting as if they were in a music video, making exaggerated expressions. When they tired of this, Ferah lit up a cigarette and asked if I wanted one. I told her I don't smoke. Shortly afterwards, Uki entered the room. Ferah stamped out her cigarette and attempted to hide it, but Uki didn't seem to notice or care. He told them there would not be any class tomorrow; instead, they were all required to attend a seminar and performance of the *Saman* dance.

During the class Uki had them work on what he called the "Extra," or the variations to the dances they had already learned. He explained that the "Extra" was a free improvisation section in which they could change the language and the movements to whatever they wanted so long as it fit into the rest of the dance. The girls didn't seem to have much say in this, however, as Uki showed them a new set of moves, which were almost identical to the original movements, only more elongated and flowing. After practicing these new moves, they then met in a circle to go over the "Extra" lyrics, which were in Arabic. None of the girls spoke Arabic or understood

what the lyrics meant until Uki explained the meaning. Then he told them that they should listen for the “Extra” segment of the Gayo performance tomorrow, which could be in any language. Gabby asked if it was possible to put pop song lyrics into the song. “Yes, anything you want!” Uki replied. The girls wrote out the lyrics phonetically into their notebooks and listened carefully to Uki’s singing. Then they rehearsed the singing part several times, and at one point Putry corrected the girls who were not mimicking Uki exactly.

When Uki felt that they had a good grasp on the lyrics, they rehearsed the dance variations incorporating the singing part. The girls had a hard time with this and resorted to joking around and laughing at themselves. Uki told them not to be so lackadaisical about the movements, to be more energized and focused, but they didn’t listen. At one point in the song, a space of about twenty-five seconds, he told them to improvise their own movements. The girls swung their arms wider and turned to face a different corner of the room, but did not radically alter the movements. Watching them improvise, Uki shook his head and made corrections. He also instructed them how to slow the singing down, so that they were in control of the tempo of the song and could end the piece with a decrescendo. The girls seemed confused. At 11:30 they signed their attendance sheet and left.

### **Analysis**

Although my previous chapters have highlighted aspects of Acehnese dance performance that may provide trauma survivors, diasporans, and other practitioners a means to “resist” trauma, my observations of the above Acehnese dance rehearsals offers a more nuanced understanding of the role of Acehnese dance in addressing trauma. First, the rehearsal spaces clearly offer dancers a chance to gather together and to socialize with friends. Socializing during an Acehnese dance rehearsal, however, is not quite the same as socializing at a party or a coffee

shop. This is because Acehese dance requires dancers to perform intricate and complex movements in very close proximity to one another. Unlike soccer, for example, which also provides players an opportunity to socialize, performers of Acehese dance frequently hold hands and practice movements in unison so as to achieve a degree of “compactness” that, many dancers have commented, is not present in other Indonesian dances. As I have already explained, there were few opportunities for this kind of intimate interaction during the conflict. Today, the conservative atmosphere of Aceh, as well as the stigma that “dancing is for girls,” also limits this kind of closeness between men, except in sports activities or in traditional dance. In this way, Acehese dance rehearsals offer a space for Acehese males to physically connect with one another in an intimate way that is largely free of social criticism or stigma.

The intimacy that Acehese dance rehearsals encourage among practitioners may be enhanced if all members are of the same gender, ethnic group or religion. Because Acehese dances are gender-segregated, rehearsals are often either all-male or all-female spaces. This can create a degree of openness that may not be possible in mixed-gender spaces. Belonging to the same ethnicity or religion can also strengthen the solidarity of the dancers. For example, the Seulaweuet members were all Acehese, which meant that they could speak in Acehese or leave rehearsals to pray without leaving any members feeling excluded. However, intimacy can also be created for performers who come from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. The girls in the IKJ dance class, for example, originated from Bekasi (West Java), Jakarta (West Java), Jambi (Central Sumatra), Pekanbaru (Riau), Balikpapan (East Kalimantan), and Melak (West Java), and identified as either Muslim, Catholic, or Protestant. Despite these distinctions, it was obvious that they had become close friends and that they felt comfortable being with each other within the dance classes.

In addition to providing opportunities for socializing and strengthening solidarity, Acehnese dance rehearsals also offer participants a chance to freely experiment with physical movements and dance patterns to a degree that is not possible during performances. For example, the dance troupes in Jakarta spent a large part of their rehearsals testing out new formations and different ways to transition from one dance to the next. This not only gave the women a chance to experiment with the structure of the dance itself, but it also opened up new possibilities for physical movement, and in this sense, could give performers a new way to experience their physicality. This point is particularly salient for Acehnese women living in Aceh. Though female dancers may not be able to perform new choreographies for audiences in Aceh, in rehearsals women are free to experiment with both the dances and their own physical movements. Rehearsals may also offer an opportunity for women to explore movement patterns unrelated to Acehnese dance, as evidenced by Gabby's and Ferah's lip-syncing session.

If Acehnese dance rehearsals facilitate a degree of physical freedom and creative expression that is not always possible during performances, this may also be due to the fact that rehearsals tend to be relatively free of negative judgment. As my observations reveal, mistakes that were made during the rehearsals allowed dancers to laugh at themselves or at their friends in a light-hearted, nonjudgmental way. In contrast, mistakes made during a performance might cause dancers to feel that they had let down their troupe members or failed to properly represent their culture. For example, many of the Acehnese dancers I interviewed revealed that their feelings of nervousness upon performing Acehnese dance resulted from the fear of making a mistake, and their fears may be exacerbated if the audience members are all Acehnese. In rehearsals there is no audience except the dancers themselves, who, I have shown, are often close friends and have come to trust one another. Even for individuals who have little or no

experience in Acehese dance, most of the rehearsals I attended welcomed participants of all skill levels. When I joined the group of dancers in Sydney, for example, I never felt as though I were letting the group down because of my mistakes.

Finally, the Acehese dance rehearsals were relatively democratic spaces in which all members of a dance troupe could share their opinions about the dances and choreographies. Though there were often “leaders” of these dance groups, the leaders were primarily responsible for correcting dancers’ technique, scheduling rehearsals and performances, and making sure that some work was done during the rehearsals, so that it was not merely a space for socializing and joking around. When discussing which dances and specific choreographies to use, group members made these decisions collectively. In the Walet dance troupe, for instance, individuals not only had an opportunity to voice their ideas, but they also saw their ideas tested and reworked by the other troupe members.

My observations suggest that Acehese dance rehearsals can create a nonjudgmental, democratic space in which practitioners strengthen social bonds and experiment with creative, physical expression. In this way, Acehese dance rehearsals can help to alleviate feelings of isolation, distrust, and powerlessness—an important step in the process of resisting trauma. However, the extent to which Acehese dance rehearsals can create opportunities for trauma resistance depends upon a number of factors. First, it is crucial that the rehearsal environment feel like a safe space, in which dancers are free to test out new movements and ideas without getting it perfect on the first try. My observations of Pak Uki’s dance classes at IKJ highlight the significance of this point. Although it became clear during the class sessions that Pak Uki’s students felt comfortable joking around and could readily laugh at themselves when making mistakes, these classes differed from other dance rehearsals in that ultimately the students were



graded on their ability to learn the required movements and were expected to improve as dancers. Because their evaluator, Pak Uki, was present within each of the classes, the students were aware that too many mistakes or a failure to grasp the material would result in a lower grade. As a result, the students in Uki's classes faced a certain amount of judgment and pressure that participants in less formal rehearsal spaces would not experience.

The dance classes at IKJ also differed from other rehearsals in that there was a distinct hierarchy between Pak Uki and his students. Although the girls in Pak Uki's dance class readily voiced their opinions and tried out new moves that they came up with on their own, Pak Uki alone decided the structure of the class, the dances they would learn, and how to execute the movements, and in this way held much more authority than other troupe leaders I observed. This became evident when the girls practiced the "Extra" section. Although Uki claimed that performers could add "anything" to this section—including pop songs and lyrics in Indonesian—Uki ultimately decided what the girls would sing and chose lyrics in Arabic, which none of the students could understand. Because the IKJ classes were led by a single instructor who was responsible for evaluating and guiding his students, the dancers in Pak Uki's class did not experience the same degree of creative freedom or the same nonjudgmental atmosphere that dancers in less formal rehearsal spaces would have experienced.

In addition to the limitations I observed within the IKJ classes, the ability of Acehnese dance rehearsals to provide a comforting and intimate space to participants may also be affected by the extent to which participants must balance other commitments. Most of the dancers I observed had other jobs or responsibilities that may have prevented them from attending or fully participating in the rehearsals. As I mentioned earlier, part of what makes Acehnese dance such an intimate practice is the "compactness," or solidarity, created among all of the members.

When even one group member is missing, the dynamic of the entire group changes. It can also be more difficult to perform the moves, since many of the dances require an even number of dancers, each of whom has a specific role during the interlocking sections. As Pak Uki emphasized, when individual dancers are late or absent from rehearsals, the group as a whole suffers. The absence or withdrawal of dancers from a rehearsal can thus significantly influence the degree of intimacy and trust felt among troupe members.

For both the younger dancers, who had to concentrate on their jobs or school exams, and some of the older female dancers, who had to care for their small children, finding the time to attend a 2-3 hour evening dance rehearsal could prove challenging. This latter point may be particularly relevant for Acehnese women, whose social responsibilities, I have suggested, are linked to their roles as wives and mothers. Even when mothers are able to bring their children to the rehearsal, this may prevent them from fully participating in the group activities. The woman in the Walet dance troupe who brought her children to the rehearsal, for example, was considered responsible for looking after her kids even when her husband was present and could have helped out. Nina's comments about Cut Aja Riska also suggest that for Acehnese women, one's responsibilities as a wife and mother often take precedence over one's performance activities. Nina remarked, "For a wife who is already married...maybe she's busy now with the household routine. She's not active [as a performer] anymore."<sup>503</sup>

It is also important to note that in Aceh, female dancers over the age of forty are rarely seen performing in public. In all of the Acehnese dance performances I have witnessed—in Aceh, Jakarta, Sydney, and Hawaii—female dancers are between the ages of 5 and 26. This does

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<sup>503</sup> Nina, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 21, 2010. Indonesian: "*Yang Aceh, saya hanya tahu, bisa laki-laki itu Pak Asnawi Abdullah, kemudian yang perempuan adalah Ruli Novarita, alumni, dua-duanya alumni IKJ. Sebenarnya ada satu lagi alumni IKJ, namanya Cut Aja Riska. Tetapi beliau sering bukanya tari diperkembang tapi karena vocalnya bagus, itu dia menjadi penyanyi, lebih memilih seperti itu. Bagi istri yang menikah mungkin sibukan dari rutinitas rumahtangga, bukan aktif lagi.*"

not mean that older women cannot be *involved* in performance; on the contrary, they usually occupy the roles of troupe manager, costume designer, or choreographer for troupes of young girls or boys. In my conversations with Nindy Silvie, a young Acehnese woman and self-proclaimed “feminist,” Nindy confirmed my suspicions that “there is no place for older women to be dancers or performers,” and after turning thirty, women with some background in dance performance tend to become troupe managers and seamstresses.<sup>504</sup> Though Nindy also felt that it is rare to see older male dancers, I have seen a far greater number of older male dancers than older female dancers. Perhaps more importantly, there are several Acehnese men over the age of forty who are still active and well-known as *professional* dancers, including Pak Uki, Pak Idrus, and Asnawi Abdullah, whereas Acehnese would be hard-pressed to name a single Acehnese female dancer over forty who performs professionally.

In addition to the obstacles that Acehnese female performers face in attending rehearsals, my observations of these rehearsals suggest that although rehearsals can offer a relatively judgment-free space in which to practice and experiment, Acehnese female dancers were more inclined to feel nervous or anxious about being evaluated than were Acehnese males. For example, whereas the members of the Seulaweuet dance troupe felt that they did not need to spend a significant amount of time rehearsing before their performance and were quite confident in their abilities to perform after only a brief “run-through,” the Acehnese female dancers of Redy’s troupe worried that their performance was not quite ready to be seen by the public (i.e., me), and were initially anxious about how I might judge them. They also told me they thought they needed to rehearse more frequently.

## TELA

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<sup>504</sup> Nindy Silvie, interview with author, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, November 30, 2010.

My observations and analysis of Acehnese dance rehearsals suggest that these are spaces where dancers can build intimate relationships with one another, voice their individual opinions, act without fear of judgment or criticism, and experiment with new choreographies and ways of experiencing their own physicality. But does this mean that Acehnese dance rehearsals are necessarily “healing”? And if “healing” is not a sufficient term to describe the benefits of these rehearsals, how else can we describe the significance these rehearsals may have for practitioners, particularly Acehnese women?

In order to take my analysis further, I want to offer a comparison between the Acehnese dance rehearsals I have observed and another type of rehearsal I not only observed but also actively participated in for sixteen weeks. TELA, which stands for “Teen Education in the Liberation Arts,” is a group that was created in 2006 by Brent Blair, a Theater professor at the University of Southern California (USC), and Jennifer Freed and Rendy Freedman, who founded the Santa Barbara Academy of Healing Arts (AHA) in 2000. Together, Blair, Freed and Freedman established a program that uses methodologies from Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed to create communal discussions about the issues that teens struggle with in their everyday lives. Participants in the program spend sixteen weeks building dramatic scenes based on real-life experiences and later perform them for audience members, who are asked to both comment upon and actively participate in the scenes. This type of theater, which Boal terms Forum Theater, thus facilitates collaboration between actors and audience members, who work together to change the outcome of the scenes.

Unlike conventional theater, in which there exists “the code of non-interference by the audience,”<sup>505</sup> Forum Theater invites audience members to propose their own alternatives to the

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<sup>505</sup> Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 72.

scenes presented before them, and to enact these alternatives themselves. In this way, the audience members are “spect-actors,” or “active observers.”<sup>506</sup> Moreover, Forum Theater does not aim to provide hard-and-fast “solutions” to the kinds of issues raised. Boal insists, “Forum Theatre is not propaganda theatre, it is not the old didactic theatre. It is pedagogical in the sense that we all learn together, actors and audience. The play—or ‘model’—must present a mistake, a failure so that the spect-actors will be spurred into finding solutions and inventing new ways of confronting oppression. We pose good questions, but the audience must supply good answers.”<sup>507</sup> For Blair, the term “rupture” more appropriately describes the kinds of issues that teen participants bring to the TELA workshops. Blair writes, “for years I had been surrounded by a cultural field supremely interested in youth, particularly in the population rather loosely defined as ‘urban teens’...and had learned to view patterns of suffering and dis-ease as ruptures rather than problems, the latter inviting a ‘solution’ or fix, the former really asking for little more than investigation and a curious heart.”<sup>508</sup>

I became involved with TELA during their 2009-2010 program. This was the second year TELA had begun to work with Sojourn, an organization in Santa Monica, California, that provides resources for women survivors of domestic violence, where I have been a volunteer for over five years. In collaborating with Sojourn, the TELA organizers aimed to focus the program on issues of domestic violence and teen dating violence, and recruited teens who had some experience with either or both of these issues. The 2009-2010 TELA group initially consisted of seven teen participants, four mentors/volunteers (myself included), and three “jokers,” who help to guide the group toward the common goal of a performance. Boal explains, “one of the actors

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<sup>506</sup> Augusto Boal, *Rainbow of Desire*, 40.

<sup>507</sup> Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 18-19.

<sup>508</sup> Blair Blair, “TELAvision: Weaving Connections for Teen Theatre of the Oppressed,” in *Youth and Theatre of the Oppressed*, eds. Peter Duffy and Elaine Vettraino (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 98.

must also exercise the auxiliary function of joker, the wild card, leader of the game. It is up to him or her to explain the rules of the game, to correct errors made, and to encourage both parties not to stop playing.”<sup>509</sup> In keeping with the mission of Theater of the Oppressed, TELA aims to give participants, volunteers, and jokers equal opportunity to voice their opinions and contribute to the group’s activities. In the 2009-10 program, Blair and two Sojourn employees acted as jokers. The volunteers, besides myself, were college students from Blair’s “Theater and Therapy” course taught at USC. The seven participants, three males and four females, came from a range of backgrounds and experiences. Three identified as African-American, two identified as Hispanic, and one identified as Caucasian. Four of the participants had participated in TELA in the past and were aspiring actors. The other three had no prior acting experience and no immediate desire to pursue acting as a career.

From October 2009 to March 2010 I attended the 3-hour sessions, which met once a week on Fridays, observing but also actively participating in the program. The sessions were divided into groups of four, with different goals for each four-week period. What follows are my observations from these TELA meetings.

### **Building Trust (Weeks 1-4)**

As I mentioned above, the ultimate goal of the TELA sessions is to perform the teens’ personal experiences with domestic violence or dating violence for a public audience, and to invite that audience to question, deconstruct, and reconstruct the scenes. Before we could perform such personal experiences for an unknown audience, however, we had to be able to share these stories with one another. In order to transform our TELA group, which consisted of

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<sup>509</sup> Boal, *Games for Actors*, 21.

mostly strangers, into a confident community theater company, the initial meetings (Weeks 1-4) focused on getting to know one another and building trust.

Each session began with a “check-in,” in which participants, volunteers, and jokers sat in a tight circle and shared the highs and lows of their week as well as their questions or goals for the session. During the check-ins, a “talking stick” was passed around to prevent others from interrupting the speaker and encourage respectful sharing. In later sessions, some participants saw the check-ins as a much-needed opportunity to talk about hardships at home, school, or work. Our initial check-ins, however, often lasted 45-50 minutes due to interruptions, friends making fun of one another, and unrestrained giggling.

After the check-ins, we played a variety of “games,” which were also derived from Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed model. According to Blair, “Games do more than bring mind and body together; they allow for spontaneity and free play, essential elements for inviting personal and then political transformation...For us, in preparation for our work in connectivity and liberatory praxis, it seems clear that we needed games to move us, as Boal notes, from a position in culture as passive objects toward that of more active subjects.”<sup>510</sup> Though the check-ins offered a chance for us to verbally connect with one another, the games also required us to come out of our comfort zones and interact with our colleagues. Some of the games involved quick, action-reaction activities with one partner, such as trying to touch your partner’s back before your partner touches yours. Other games involved the whole group. In “Bibbity Bibbity Bop,” for example, we all stood in a circle, facing each other. The game began with one member shouting “Bibbity Bibbity BOP” as fast as s/he could, giving emphasis to the “BOP” and, upon saying it, pointing to a random group member. If this second group member shouted “BOP”

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<sup>510</sup> Blair, “TELAvision,” 104.

before the first group member finished uttering the whole phrase, the first group member must start over. However, if the first group member completed the phrase before the second group member had a chance to yell “BOP,” the second group member was “out” and the game ended. A new round then began with the “out” group member, who tried to pass on the “BOP” to another group member. This game must be played rapidly and loudly so as to get group members as energized as possible.

Though these games allowed participants to joke around and be silly, to get to know one another, and to “loosen up,” both physically and emotionally, the Sojourn employees pointed out that games, by their very nature, set up a hierarchy between “winner” and “loser” and have the potential to invite unfriendly competition or jeering. This was rarely an issue for the TELA group in which I participated, but some adjustments were made to avoid these potential pitfalls. For example, one game, which was a variation on “Bippity Bippity Bop,” initially required the “losers” to “die” in the center of the circle—that is, to collapse in slow-motion toward the floor in a dramatic display of suffering. After some discussion, however, the jokers decided to replace this symbolically violent gesture with a celebratory action. Rather than lowering oneself to the floor, then, the “loser” would enter the circle and perform a spontaneous, energetic movement of his/her choice that symbolized, for this individual, a celebration of his/her humanity—that is, a celebration of our universal capacity to err. Other games also adopted this response to mistake-making, such that the participants were encouraged to laugh together with the group or to exclaim “Yippee!” once they had “lost.” This revision of the games was intended to prevent the “loser” from feeling singled out, and to detach negative judgment from mistake-making.

In my own observations, the 2009-2010 TELA participants did not seem to take their “losing” personally, and found immense enjoyment in the games. During the initial check-ins,



most participants commented that their goals for the session were to play games and “just have fun.” They also commented that they had been looking forward to playing the games all week, and that the games helped them to transition from a stressful week into a relaxing weekend.

In our third and fourth sessions, the games were increasingly tied to theater exercises, so that TELA participants could begin to think about how to “show” rather than tell, and experiment with other techniques that would be useful for them later in building their own scenes. For example, we practiced Boal’s “Image Theater” with various exercises that required us to sculpt our bodies into visual expressions of an emotion or an idea. In one game, the joker asked for TELA participants to find a partner and discuss each other’s likes and dislikes, their hopes and dreams, their family, their beliefs, and their “ruptures.” After everyone finished their discussions, the group members formed a circle without standing next to their partners; in this way, partners were kept anonymous. The joker then asked participants to share, one by one, a single image that represented what their partner had revealed for each of these categories. For example, when the joker called out, “Likes,” many participants began listening to imaginary headphones. When the joker called out “Dislikes,” many of them took on a violent pose. Later, participants explained that the experience made them feel closer to their partner because they felt that their partner had truly embodied their ideas. More than simply listening to them, the participants felt that their partners had been able to physically interpret what they were saying, and in this way could empathize with them.

Other games exercised our acting muscles by assigning stereotypic roles and encouraging a physical exploration of space. In one game, for example, all TELA group members were asked to walk hurriedly around the room, taking up as much space as possible and changing directions frequently. Suddenly one of the jokers would call out “Businessman!” and at that moment we all

became our own interpretations of a businessman, whipping out our invisible Blackberrys, straightening our make-believe ties, and pushing through the space in our imagined self-importance. After almost a minute of this, another joker called out, “Valley girl!” Our voices and postures altered to meet this new command as the fast-paced walking continued. Jokers participated equally in these games, but would also offer direction so as to keep the activity lively and the members engaged. “Louder!” they shouted. “Talk to one another! Don’t walk in a pattern!” These exercises helped group members become comfortable with taking up a lot of space and drawing attention to oneself in a loud, unapologetic fashion. For participants with no acting experience, such as myself, these exercises helped us become comfortable with the idea of performing on stage.

Some of the theater games also began to incorporate themes we aimed to work on in our performance, including family life, dating relationships, and violence. The game “Family Dinner,” for example, split the participants and volunteers into groups of four. Each group was a “family,” but, consistent with Boal’s teachings, no roles were assigned and no scripts were provided. Instead, participants had ten seconds to silently embody one member of the family. Participants were free to embody any role of their choosing, regardless of gender. Next, participants looked at one another to observe their group members’ roles based on the other individuals’ postures and facial expressions. After another 10-15 seconds of observation, participants were invited to begin a dialogue with their family members, speaking from within their character. This dialogue began softly, in slow-motion, and eventually erupted into fast-paced shouting. Then the joker called out for group members to move to their left, occupying the chair—and the role—that had been there before. Again a dialogue was started. This continued until each group member had a chance to embody everyone at the table. Before I

knew it, my group members had transformed into a tearful mother, an out-of-control son, a disinterested daughter, and a passed-out drunk father. We had communicated our roles to one another through expression rather than explanation. We had also ventured outside of our gender roles, taking on whatever character we most identified with at that moment.

Our fourth meeting also aimed to give participants some background in Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed as well as a basic introduction to domestic violence and teen dating violence. The jokers introduced key terms to the group, such as "protagonist," "antagonist," and "oppression," so that we could begin to relate these terms to our own lives and achieve a better understanding of the theory behind our practice. These discussions were by no means lectures, however, and many of the discussions continued into the following weeks, as the participants had differing ideas about what oppression was, who could be oppressed by whom, and how to account for multiple and simultaneous oppressions. For example, many of the teen participants felt that a woman who ultimately agrees to have sex with her boyfriend after he ignores her initial response of "no" and pressures her until she says "yes," has given her consent to having sex and is not oppressed by her boyfriend. Rather than lecturing the participants, or telling them how they should view this predicament, the jokers facilitated a dialogue that invited participants to act out this particular scenario, so that they could see for themselves how manipulation can work to oppress others.

The end of each session always followed the same ritual. Everyone—jokers, volunteers and participants—came together in a circle, held hands, and took turns sharing what we had learned from our meeting and what we appreciated about the group. After thanking each other and our ancestors, we hugged and departed.

### **Finding Our Ruptures (Weeks 5-8)**

The games and exercises performed in these first few weeks invited participants to bring their own associations with family life, stereotypes, and personal relationships into the room without being asked directly, “What is your home life like? Does your family get along?” In Weeks 5-8, however, we began to perform exercises that brought greater focus to the individual participants and the issues they were grappling with in their daily lives. These exercises enabled participants to begin to think about the kinds of issues they might wish to raise later on in their scenes.

One of most intriguing and emotional exercises we tried is called “Cop in the Head.” For Boal, “we set out from the premises that the oppressions suffered by the citizens of authoritarian societies (such as we are all familiar with) can profoundly damage them. Authoritarianism penetrates even into the individual’s unconscious. The cop leaves the barracks (the moral, ideological barracks) and moves into one’s head.”<sup>511</sup> By personifying the negative voices that individuals hear in their minds, Cop in the Head gave participants an opportunity to contest these voices. I first learned about Cop in the Head through Elmira, a sixteen-year old Mexican female who had never participated in TELA before nor had any prior experience with acting or theater games. Elmira stood with one of the jokers in front of the volunteers and participants, who sat in a U shape, listening and watching intently as “spect-actors.” The joker asked Elmira to think about the negative voices she hears in her head and to share with us the kinds of things that they say. This exercise was neither quick nor easy. Elmira was reluctant to announce these criticisms for all fourteen of us to hear, since these kinds of statements—“You’re fat,” or “You’re ugly,” for example—reflected Elmira’s insecurities and put her in a position of vulnerability. After Elmira had shared two of these internal voices, the joker asked for two members of the audience

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<sup>511</sup> Boal, *Games for Actors*, 191.

who could identify with these voices to come up and embody them. Boal explains, “the director asks who in the group *identifies* with one or other of the images of oppressors...or *recognizes* them. Whoever identifies with one of these images, or recognizes it—because he has recognized in it someone concrete, who has caused or is causing him suffering, or because it reminds him of his own antagonist—must replace the actor in this image of the antagonist.”<sup>512</sup> Elmira stood in the middle of the two volunteers, who were then asked to repeat these hurtful statements. The volunteers were also invited to elaborate upon these statements, so that the same criticism was uttered in different ways, and to really hold their ground. The joker explained that if the two Cops relented too easily, the experience would not be beneficial to Elmira, whose own cops, as we all know, are not easily destroyed. “Is this what it sounds like?” the joker asked Elmira. “Is this accurate?” Elmira was given the opportunity to modify the criticisms or make other corrections so that the performance most closely matched her own experience.

After the volunteers had embodied these two voices, effectively becoming the two “cops” in her head, the joker asked for a third individual to replace Elmira. “Who can identify with Elmira?” he asked. “Can anyone relate to hearing these particular voices?” Several hands went up. The joker selected another member of the audience to replace Elmira so that she had the opportunity to stand outside of herself and observe. Elmira also coached her replacement, correcting her posture and expression so that her replacement was as accurate as possible. Once the scenario was, according to Elmira, as accurate as possible, Elmira’s replacement returned to the audience and Elmira was asked to face the cops herself, one at a time. The goal of the exercise was to encourage Elmira to stand up to her cops, to fight back, to gain confidence in the act of opposing her very judgmental, very real inner voices.

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<sup>512</sup> Boal, *Rainbow of Desire*, 121.

As we watched Elmira, however, we began to worry that the exercise was not going according to plan. Elmira shrank and began to tear up as the first cop hurled the hurtful words at her. “What do you want to say to that?” the joker encouraged, gently. “Do you believe that?” Rather than telling her what to say in her defense, the joker carefully urged Elmira to confront her cop, but we could see that she was too wounded to do this. The joker then asked for Elmira’s replacement to stand in for her. Elmira’s replacement took in the criticisms and responded with strong, powerful statements, such as, “I don’t believe you! You’re wrong! I’m beautiful!” The joker asked Elmira to mimic her replacement, using the exact same stance, gestures, and tone of voice. But when it came to verbally responding to the cop, Elmira fell silent and began to cry.

“Okay, Elmira, I want you to think of someone you really care about, someone you’re very close to. Can you think of someone?” Elmira nodded. “My sister.” Elmira’s replacement remained facing the first cop while Elmira watched from outside. As the cop began to repeat his ugly criticisms, the joker asked Elmira to imagine that her replacement was her sister and that these words were directed towards her sister. “Can you stand up for her?” the joker asked. Elmira clenched her fists and fought back her tears, staring with hatred at the cop. “No, she’s NOT!” she screamed. “She is NOT ugly! She is NOT fat! She’s the kindest, most beautiful, smartest person in the WORLD and you will NEVER be like her!” The joker carefully encouraged the first cop to continue until their argument began to fall apart. “Now tell this cop to leave,” the joker guided. Elmira yelled at her cop until he returned to the audience. The group then applauded Elmira.

This was one of the most emotional and memorable performances our group experienced over the sixteen weeks. It was painful to watch Elmira struggle with the voices that are just as real in her mind as they were to all of us in the exercise. And it was amazing to see her finally

fight back, even if this meant fighting on behalf of someone else, using “she” instead of “I.” The game also gave us insight into the personal struggles and vulnerabilities of the TELA participants, which increased intimacy and trust within the group. In addition, Cop in the Head gave all of us “spectators” a lesson in replacements, which we would continue to perform in the following weeks. By replacing one another, we were able to share various “tactics” that might help the protagonist to be successful in his/her struggle. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, I understand a “tactic” as “a guileful ruse...an art of the weak.”<sup>513</sup> In this way, the exercise of replacements enabled TELA participants to share with one another their tactics for confronting various kinds of oppression. Finally, this exercise allowed us to experience the kind of acting that Theater of the Oppressed encourages: acting that is based on real emotions, real experiences, and real confrontations. For example, although the Cops in the scene did not really believe the horrible things they said to Elmira and in this sense were “acting,” the reason they were able to perform the antagonist role so convincingly was because they had had their own confrontations with similar Cops and criticisms. In this way, the strength of the performance came from the performer’s real-life experiences and not his/her acting skills.

Another game that aimed specifically to build tactics for protagonists is called the “Circle of Antagonists.” In this exercise, TELA teens were partnered with a volunteer and asked to come up with a scene from their own lives that related to the theme of domestic violence or teen dating violence. The teens were encouraged to be the protagonist, but they were also given the option of designating their partner, the volunteer, as the protagonist if they wanted to play antagonist. The teen was not supposed to explain the scene to his/her partner. Next, the joker asked all of those designated as antagonists to form a circle facing outwards, with their partners

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<sup>513</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 37.

forming an outer circle, and each partner facing one another. Again without explaining the scene, the protagonists then “sculpted” their antagonist so that s/he closely resembled their antagonist in stance and expression. Then the protagonists sculpted themselves, so that a silent “image” of the scene was created. For thirty seconds the protagonist began his/her “monologue,” in which s/he voiced what s/he wanted within the scene. This was not done from an outside perspective, however, but fully “within character.” This monologue also aimed to expose how the antagonist was preventing the protagonist from getting what s/he wanted. Once this protagonist had his/her monologue, the antagonist would respond in a thirty-second improvisation. Afterwards, the protagonist critiqued the antagonist’s performance until it more accurately reflected his/her real-life antagonist. The joker then allotted one minute for the protagonist and the antagonist to face off, fully embodying the characters they inhabited. The goal was to produce an intense scene in which both characters tried to get what s/he wanted without caving in to the demands of the other.

Once the two partners had a chance to confront one another, the joker called, “Switch!” Each protagonist shifted to his/her right, the antagonists remained in their spot and remained in character. The antagonist was given thirty seconds to convey his/her character to the protagonists, who entered the scene without any verbal explanation of the argument they were about to have. Next, the protagonists, facing their new antagonists, began to verbally confront each other. Again, each individual was asked to fully embrace the desires of their character so that an intense argument ensued. This continued until the protagonists had made their way around the antagonist circle and returned to their original partner. They then re-enacted the scene with their original partner.



Throughout this exercise, the three jokers moved around the circle, encouraging the actors to give the performance their all: “Get what you want! Fight for what you want!” they urged. Afterwards, we all reflected on the experience. What was it like for the protagonists to confront so many different antagonists? Did they discover new tactics for getting what they wanted as they progressed around the circle? What about the antagonists? Did they notice any changes in their original partner from the first confrontation to the second? Once we had discussed this exercise with the group, we then returned to our partner to discuss how we might expand the argument into a larger scene. The protagonist was finally able to more fully explain the scene to his/her antagonist, and the scenes were rehearsed and eventually performed so that they could be critiqued by the rest of the group.

When I began this exercise with Elmira, she said that she didn’t entirely understand what was being asked of us, and couldn’t think of any scenarios from her own life to act out. Since we didn’t have much time to discuss this, I volunteered to be the protagonist and quickly recalled an argument I’d had with an ex-boyfriend. I sculpted her into the image of my ex-boyfriend and as we moved into the circle, I could tell that Elmira was familiar with my antagonist. She embodied this role in her own way and shouted back at me with a power I had not seen during the Cop in the Head exercise. After I made the rounds confronting the other antagonists, the joker asked us to return to our original partners and discuss how to turn that one argument into a larger scene. That was when I realized that I was going to have to perform a very personal and unpleasant memory for the entire group.

We spent approximately fifteen minutes discussing and rehearsing the scene, found our beginning and end, then gathered any props available in the room that would help us in our performance. Then the joker asked each protagonist to supply a title for his/her scene and share

it with the rest of the group. When it was our turn, I found myself getting rather nervous while Elmira confidently embraced her role. We recreated our argument, taking care not to let it escalate too quickly since, in reality, it had been a long and drawn out scene. Then I let out a grunt of frustration and slammed an imaginary door signaling the end of the scene. The group then discussed how we could make this scene stronger. The joker explained that this was a difficult scene to work with because the antagonist was drunk, which meant that no amount of reasoning or pleading on the protagonist's behalf would effect the kind of transformation we all wanted to see in the antagonist. He then suggested that we improvise a scene that takes place the following morning when the boyfriend is no longer drunk. I returned with the stage to argue with Elmira, using the same tactics I had employed in the previous scene—namely, laying things out in a very logical way. But Elmira held her ground. She dismissed all of my words as lies and the argument quickly fizzled.

“What did you think of Elmira's performance?” the joker asked me, making sure that Elmira's improvisations were still true to my experience and matched the behavior of my antagonist. “Well, in reality, I don't think he would yell and tell me I'm a liar because that's his drunk behavior. The morning after he would just ignore me and try to avoid this exact conversation.” The joker then asked if anyone in the room could identify with this scene. “How many people know this antagonist?” He selected one of the participants who had responded to replace Elmira, and we performed the scene again, with our new volunteer playing the role of my father. With this new antagonist, however, I was still unable to argue effectively for what I wanted. This time the joker asked if anyone in the room could identify on some level with me, the protagonist. We rehearsed the scene a few more times with various protagonists and antagonists as I observed from the outside and made suggestions as to what kinds of behaviors

were the most genuine, most true to character. With each performance, the joker also asked the audience, “What did you see?” “How was this different from the previous version of this scene?” “Did the protagonist get what she wanted?” Everyone had a chance to give his/her opinion of the scene. Finally, one of the TELA volunteers took my place and, though my antagonist did not completely transform, the group agreed that her performance was the most effective of all the versions we had seen, since my antagonist actually agreed to listen to what I, the protagonist, wanted. The joker then told me to return to the role of protagonist and take on the qualities that the other TELA volunteer had brought to the performance. The antagonist was encouraged, as always, to respond in a ways that s/he deemed to be true to that character, and to not cave in simply because we had switched protagonists.

By the end of the session I felt empowered from the performance. I was not used to sharing personal details about my past with a group of teenagers whom I had only known for four or five weeks, nor was I accustomed to acting. But I had successfully shared my story with the TELA participants, conveying it to them in a way that would not have been possible had I told it to them verbally. I had also heard and seen how my peers, when placed in the same situation, would try to respond to my antagonist. Their suggestions—their tactics—not only helped me to achieve my goals within that particular scene, but they also proved useful to me outside of the TELA sessions when I found myself in similar confrontations.

### **Building Scenes (Weeks 9-12)**

Performing scenes like the one that I performed for the TELA group became our primary activity from Weeks 9-12. The jokers gave the TELA participants their only take-home assignment: to think of a scene from their lives that had to do with the theme of teen dating violence or domestic violence, and to write it out as a script. These weeks were devoted to

performing the participants' scenes, replacing protagonists and antagonists, and offering our suggestions in order to make the scenes strong.

In these weeks, the dynamic of our TELA sessions underwent several changes. First, two participants and one volunteer dropped out of TELA due to family issues or too much stress at school. Many of the participants and volunteers were full-time students with jobs, who were relinquishing their Friday nights in order to attend the TELA sessions. In addition, some of the teens' parents felt that their childrens' time could be better spent working, rather than participating in a theater group whose goals they did not completely understand. By Week 9, our group consisted of only four TELA participants, three volunteers and three jokers. The dynamic between the participants and the jokers also changed in these weeks. Blair, who had previously positioned himself as one of three jokers, took on a much more assertive role. He explained to the group that he would be putting on his "director" hat, and treating our group more like a community theater company and less like a teen support group. As a result, he and the other jokers became much more serious, reminding us of our upcoming performance dates and discouraging participants from joking around in ways that took us away from our goal of creating scenes. Almost all of the participants understood that we had limited time to create and polish our scenes, and though we continued to have fun, the participants became more focused and hard-working. In these weeks, our check-ins took 15-20 minutes and our dinner breaks were spent discussing improvements for particular scenes.

Another shift that took place during these weeks occurred within the scenes themselves. In the previous week, as I illustrated with my own story, the goal was to create a scene that was as similar to the protagonist's real-life experience as it could possibly be. In some ways, as with the Cop in the Head exercises, our performances also served a therapeutic purpose, giving

participants a chance to share something personal with our group and to work through these painful issues with the support of an audience, who offer their own tactics. In Weeks 9-12, however, we worked the scenes with a different goal in mind—performing them for a public audience. In this way, though the scenes were still mostly true to the protagonist who had offered the story, we might make changes as a group that gave the scene more universality, so that more individuals could find themselves identifying with the characters. Boal explains, “instead of investigating the *singularities* of this particular case, we try, using the participation of others, to go from the particular to the *general*, by which we mean the *universality* of particular cases within the same category.”<sup>514</sup>

For example, Tim, an African-American man who had participated in TELA in previous years, wrote a scene about a recent encounter he had had with his ex-girlfriend, which continued to distress him. In the scene, Tim sees his ex-girlfriend, who is walking with her new boyfriend, pass by. Tim asks to speak with her privately and, reluctantly, she dismisses her new boyfriend. “What do you want?” she asks, in a rude voice. “I miss you. I just wanted to know how you’re doing. Do you want to grab coffee sometime?” Tim’s ex-girlfriend explains that Tim had hurt her in the past and she doesn’t want to open up old wounds. Tim persists, arguing, “It’s just an innocent cup of coffee,” and then makes fun of her new boyfriend. At one point, he grabs his ex-girlfriend’s arm and attempts to woo her with sweet-talk. Disgusted, Tim’s ex-girlfriend tells him that he needs to grow up and walks away. When the joker invited the spect-actors to comment, many of the female participants claimed that the scene resonated with them, since Tim’s character reminded them of “creepy” or “over-protective” boyfriends they had had in the past. They were eager to step in and make the scene stronger with their own interpretation. But

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<sup>514</sup> Boal, *Games for Actors*, 191.

Tim felt that the scene had been misunderstood. He argued that *he*, not the ex-girlfriend, was the protagonist in the scene, and his ex, who wouldn't give him a chance to win her back, was the antagonist.

Our group spent the rest of the TELA session discussing and re-enacting this scene. The joker explained, and most of the group agreed, that by making Tim's character more manipulative—performing him as someone who is both aggressive and gentle in attempting to “win back” his ex-girlfriend—the scene could be a powerful example of the kinds of violences that teens—particularly women—experience in their dating relationships, and in this way, would be useful for our audience members, many of whom would be teens themselves. The Sojourn staff members then added that this scene could open up a discussion for the audience about whether or not “Tim” (the character, not the individual) was being abusive. They claimed that this was an important discussion to have, because many teens—as well as adults—often do not recognize emotional abuse when it happens to them, and think of violence as a purely physical act. By the end of the session, the TELA group was excited about the scene Tim had provided, and had come up with additional changes that they felt would make the scene more interesting and more relevant for the audiences. But Tim was frustrated. He argued that the group was turning his scene into something he hadn't intended it to be, and claimed that in scenes like this the audiences “are always rooting for the girl” instead of hearing the male's side. “You're making him look like a creep,” he explained. “I don't want people thinking I'm like that.”

From Tim's perspective, TELA functioned as a support group where he was able to tell *his* story from *his* perspective. Having already learned quite a bit about Tim's family life from our check-ins and theatrical exercises, we understood that it was important for Tim to have a space where he could speak his mind without being shut down or threatened with violence,

which often happened when he tried to vent at home. However, we also felt that Tim’s scene could serve as a powerful conversation-starter for an audience of teens and adults. As we continued to work with the scene, Blair explained to Tim that the audience would not see “Tim” (the character) as a reflection of Tim (the actor) and draw from the performance that Tim (the actor) was a creep; instead, they would view “Tim” as an “any man” figure who represented larger issues. The tensions Tim felt between, on the one hand, offering a personal and true scene, and, on the other hand, altering the scene so that it could serve the greater community, were not experienced by Tim alone. As we worked with other participants’ scenes, we saw a similar reluctance on their part to introduce new material and to generalize their stories. In this way, a primary challenge we experienced in Weeks 9-12 was to find a balance between remaining true to the participants’ real-life experiences, and offering a scene that had universal value for the audience.

### **The Performance (Weeks 13-16)**

In the last weeks of our TELA meetings, we spent little time on check-ins (5-10 minutes) and no time on games or other exercises. All of our time was devoted to polishing and memorizing the scenes, of which we had six. All of the scenes were originally written by the TELA participants and were generated from their life experiences, but in these final weeks we rarely consulted their scripts, and instead worked the scenes through active experimentation and improvisation. Every volunteer, participant, and joker was involved in the creation of the scenes, whether through replacing a protagonist or antagonist in order to convey his/her vision, or through “active listening,” offering their critique and suggestions to improve the scenes. Although our final versions of the scenes did not have written scripts, the actors were expected to

memorize most of their lines. For longer arguments the actors could improvise as long as they fought for what they believed their character wanted.

The scenes explored a variety of contentious relationships with which audience members—both teens and adults—could identify. One scene depicted a violent step-father/step-son relationship; another showed a manipulative boyfriend pressuring his girlfriend to prove her love for him. In the last two weeks, we fine-tuned the scenes by giving them titles, adding music and props, and working on the transitions from one scene to the next. The jokers also experimented with ways to draw connections among the scenes so that they appeared as six separate parts of one story, rather than six unrelated stories.

Our first performance was held at a small theater in Santa Monica for an audience of approximately fifty people. Blair began the show with a brief introduction in which he informed the audience that our performance, unlike traditional plays, was open to critique and revision. After watching all six scenes, the audience would be asked to choose two or three scenes to “do over,” with the aim of changing the outcome so that the protagonist is able to get what s/he wants. We then performed all of the scenes from beginning to end. In most of the scenes, tensions were left unresolved, or the protagonist eventually gave up his/her desire and caved in to the demands of the antagonist. “Did you like the way that scene ended?” Blair asked the audience, referring to specific scenes in their program. He then asked the audience to vote, via a show of hands, on the scenes that they most wanted to redo. Then we reenacted the scene they were most interested in changing.

“Okay, now what do we want to change about this?” Blair asked when we had finished. Several audience members began to comment. “I don’t think she should have agreed to smoke the cigarette,” one audience member said. “Great, come on down and show us what *you* would



have done!” At this invitation to perform, many audience members were reluctant, particularly the adults. They preferred to explain their vision rather than act it out. But Blair insisted that they would be able to convey their ideas more clearly if they performed it themselves. Next, the audience member who had volunteered a suggestion replaced the protagonist, and the scene was re-played exactly as it had been performed previously. Once the audience members stood in the protagonist’s shoes, they often discovered that winning the argument with their antagonist was much more difficult than they had thought. For example, when one audience member was offered a cigarette from her boyfriend, she responded, “No thanks, I don’t smoke.” The boyfriend persisted. “Don’t you love me? I—I’m hurt.” “Well, you’re a loser!” she responded, and marched off. Then Blair asked the audience if they thought this particular version of the scene was effective. Others chimed in: “I don’t think she wants to break up with him, though. I think she just wants him to love her regardless of whether she smokes the cigarette or not.” This audience member was then invited to come replace the protagonist.

We re-enacted this scene as many times as there were suggestions. With each version, Blair asked the audience to reflect on what they saw and to decide whether or not they thought the revision was effective. In this way, the actors and audience members worked together to find alternative endings to the scenes through dialogue and experimentation. When we agreed that some approaches, or tactics, were more successful than others, we discussed why we thought this was the case. After performing one scene with many replacements, we then moved on to the next scene and again invited audience members to perform their alternative endings. In most of our re-enactments, we were not able to neatly resolve the issues presented; after all, we were dealing with complex characters who had complex desires and needs. However, we did get to see a variety of endings and to reflect on what *we* would do if we were in the protagonist’s

position. This part of our program lasted about one and a half hours, until we had run through two or three scenes five or six times. We ended by thanking the audience for their suggestions and encouraging them to continue to reflect on these issues, since many of the problems we raised had no hard-and-fast solutions.

One interesting issue that emerged in these last few weeks was the TELA participants' differing attitudes towards performing. As I mentioned earlier, some participants had prior acting experience and were even interested in pursuing acting as a career. These individuals tended to have a hard time acting in the way that Theatre of the Oppressed suggests—that is, basing one's performance on real emotions that are actually evoked within the scene. Instead, these participants saw the performance as an opportunity to showcase their acting skills. For example, as we neared the performances, Tim expressed his concern that he wasn't in enough "funny" scenes, as he wanted the audience to see that he could be funny. Other participants, such as Elmira, who had no background in acting, were afraid to perform such personal stories for an unknown audience. Though they had had sixteen weeks to grow comfortable with the rest of the TELA group, performing for 50-100 strangers was a different experience, and before each performance, many claimed that they were nervous. Blair offered the same response to both Tim and Elmira. He told them that the performances were no longer about them. In conventional theater, the actor is applauded for his skills and the applause serves his ego. In Theater of the Oppressed, Blair explained, the performance serves the audience and the greater community. For Boal, "when a person tells us their particular case, using theatre as the medium of expression, it is the group that becomes the protagonist of the session, and not the individual who told the story."<sup>515</sup> In this way, the participants should not worry about showing off their skills—

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<sup>515</sup> Boal, *Games for Actors*, 191.

or lack thereof. Through genuine performance, the goal of telling the individual stories would be achieved.

### **Analysis**

For teens struggling with issues of domestic violence and/or dating violence, the TELA workshops offered many therapeutic benefits. First, our Friday evening meetings offered teens a safe space in which to socialize and to get support from their peers. Our check-ins, for example, provided a much-needed opportunity for the participants to vent about their weekly frustrations and anxieties, as well as to share their achievements and successes. Many of the participants lacked this outlet. The kinds of activities we performed together, which often involved touching or being physically close, also encouraged intimacy among the group. Games that required us to take up space, be loud, or make funny faces enabled us to release our guardedness and open up to the group. These kinds of activities also allowed those who were shy or had no experience in acting to feel comfortable exposing their private thoughts and insecurities to their peers, which was a fundamental element of the TELA workshop.

Second, the TELA workshops offered a space where individuals felt relatively free of judgment or negative criticism. All criticisms offered during the building of scenes, for example, were directed towards characters or roles, rather than individuals, and were focused on improving the scenes, not the actors themselves. The efforts of the Sojourn staff members to deconstruct the binary between “winners” and “losers” in the games, as well as the suggestion to “celebrate our humanity” when making a mistake also contributed to the nonjudgmental atmosphere of the TELA meetings. Having the opportunity to perform an original movement when they made a mistake gave participants a chance to embrace their error and create something fun and positive from it that was usually entertaining to the rest of the group as well.

In this way, we had plenty of opportunities to laugh at ourselves and at each other without worrying about hurting anyone's feelings.

Third, within first eight weeks of the TELA meetings, everyone had equal say in the decision-making processes and the jokers, though helping to structure the meetings and facilitate discussion among participants, allowed ample time for individual expression and creative input. They also effectively managed our meeting time so that everyone had a chance to present his/her story and receive feedback from the group. There was also an element of collaborative decision-making within the final TELA performance, in which participants and audience members engaged in collective dialogue. Our performances did not aim to present problems with ready-made solutions for audiences to absorb; instead, they invited audiences to help us find alternative endings for scenes that continue to play out in our realities.

In this way, the TELA sessions did offer a form of therapy for the individual participants, giving them an opportunity to share their private stories in a safe setting, where we could experiment with alternative endings to their scenes and learn tactics from one another through replacements and reenactments. However, there were several factors that prevented TELA from offering the kind of "healing" that other kinds of support groups or even psychotherapy can offer. As I mentioned earlier, many of the participants had other obligations that occasionally prevented them from attending rehearsals; in some cases, whether due to work, school, or unsupportive parents, participants were forced to drop out. Though those participants who left certainly missed out on many of the benefits of TELA, the rest of the group was also affected. This is because TELA created intimacy among group members; when even one person was absent or dropped out, the remaining participants felt the void. In some cases, we had to stop

working on a scene that we had put a lot of energy into and that we felt would be useful for the audience to contemplate.

Second, it is important to distinguish between the first eight weeks of TELA, which were much more participant-focused, and the final weeks, in which the upcoming performance took precedence. Though our initial TELA meetings aimed to strengthen feelings of community and trust among participants and to discover their personal stories, the latter half of the TELA workshop was devoted to the development of the participants' scenes; as a result, we spent very little time on check-ins and games. Participants thus had fewer opportunities to vent or share to share their frustrations. In addition, the jokers became much more like "directors" during these final weeks and limited free, creative expression so that our time was spent building scenes for the performance. To some extent, then, the jokers' increasingly authoritative role hampered creativity and collective decision-making within the group.

The degree to which TELA functioned as a support group for the teens was also compromised by its overarching goal of serving the community as a whole. As discussed above, in the final weeks of the TELA workshop, participants were expected to "give up" their personal stories so that their characters were more universal and their personal "ruptures" were presented as issues that affect the community as a whole. Some participants, like Tim, hoped that their participation in TELA would offer them real solutions for their problems. After all, Boal states, "Theatre of the Oppressed has two fundamental linked principles: it aims (a) to help the spectator transform himself into a protagonist of the dramatic action and rehearse alternatives for his situation, so that he may then be able (b) to extrapolate into his real life the actions he has rehearsed in the practice of theatre."<sup>516</sup> Having to "give up" his story for the good of the

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<sup>516</sup> Boal, *Rainbow of Desire*, 40.

community left Tim feeling as though he was no longer the protagonist in his own story, and that the tactics or alternative endings proposed for his scene were not specific enough to be used in his real life situations. In this sense, as the workshops became increasingly focused on the final performance, Tim felt that TELA was not able to meet his individual healing needs.

Finally, the degree to which TELA can offer a safe, supportive space for teen survivors of dating or domestic violence depends in large part upon how comfortable the participants are with revisiting and sharing their experiences in a group setting. For example, although Elmira appeared to have a “break-through” during the Cop in the Head sessions and brought a very powerful story to the TELA performance, the TELA activities in which she took part may have amplified rather than quelled feelings of distress or trauma. In this way, performing one’s traumatic experiences may be painful or anxiety-provoking for some individuals, just as it may be cathartic or liberating for others. This is particularly true of the final TELA sessions and performances, about which Elmira and several other participants felt nervous. Because the final weeks of TELA were dominated by the goal of performing the participants’ stories for a live audience, any qualms or nervousness experienced by participants was treated as something that the participants would have to “get over” before sharing their scenes on stage. This is not to suggest that Blair or other jokers dismissed or trivialized participants’ stage fright; however, it was clear that the final TELA sessions aimed to create a form of “collective healing” for audience members and participants alike, and could not offer the kind of individual healing that some participants, particularly those with performance anxiety, needed.

### **THE ART OF REHEARSAL**

Although the Acehnese dance rehearsals I observed in Indonesia and Australia and the TELA workshops I observed in Los Angeles differed in many respects, my analyses suggest that

both of these performance activities can benefit participants in similar ways. First, both types of rehearsals give participants a space to socialize with their peers in a way that is physically and emotionally intimate. The interlocking dance moves that Acehese dance demands as well as the theatrical exercises and games in TELA encourage individuals to come out of their comfort zone and to fully participate with the rest of the group. Whether this requires participants to be focused and serious or silly and unrestrained, these activities encourage unity among the participants, which strengthens feelings of solidarity.

Moreover, the activities invite participants to experiment with new physical movements, whether in choreographing new dance moves or in sculpting their bodies into silent images or new roles. The freedom to experiment with new physical movements is particularly significant for Acehese. As I mentioned earlier, there are few opportunities for Acehese men to bond in such a physically intimate way without being labeled as “feminine” or “gay.” Acehese women are also confined in the kinds of physical movements that they can perform. For Debra Yatim, the conservative atmosphere within Acehese society limits the kinds of performances that take place and discourages experimentation with traditional dance forms. Debra remarked, “If you’re not fixated with *syariah*, obviously you can explore your body movements. If you go to Aceh, they’re more restrained. For example, sometimes the tempo gets into a crescendo. But [in Aceh] they do not go to that crescendo because it’s unseemly. They do not spread their legs, which means you don’t explore anything....”<sup>517</sup> Opportunities for participating in physically intimate activities may also be closed off to Acehese women (as well as other women) because of their responsibilities as wives and mothers. As evidenced by the Walet dance troupe rehearsal, women do not always have the luxury of attending rehearsals when they are responsible for

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<sup>517</sup> Debra Yatim, Interview, May 12, 2010.

caring for their children. The *balai inong*, however, a space that facilitates women's gathering and is accepted by Acehnese society, may offer just the place to hold dance rehearsals. This may explain why the Acehnese women's demand for dance classes in their *balai inong* was so strong.

In addition to providing a safe and intimate space where participants can experience their physicality in new ways, both Acehnese dance rehearsals and the first half of the TELA sessions were largely free of negative judgment, which gave participants additional freedom and created a relaxed and fun atmosphere. Unlike performances and, to some extent, dance or acting classes, in which performers are evaluated for their ability to execute movements seamlessly, the rehearsals gave participants a chance to laugh at their mistakes and to laugh at one another. This attitude toward mistake-making is radically different from the attitude of female Acehnese dancers toward performances, which provoked feelings of nervousness and anxiety for many of them. For TELA participants with no acting experience as well, the thought of performing in front of an audience brought feelings of nervousness, despite the fact that they had readily taken on new roles or improvised in scenes within the TELA rehearsals.

These different attitudes toward rehearsals and performances highlight an important distinction between performing "for fun" and performing professionally. In the previous chapter, I suggested that Acehnese women's opportunities for studying Acehnese dance professionally are limited due to societal attitudes toward women traveling abroad (where they can receive the best education in Acehnese dance) as well as social stigmas toward female performers. For Yusrizal Ibrahim, Acehnese women who pursue performance as a career may be seen as "*inong biduen* [female entertainers]," and "society's view of them is very negative."<sup>518</sup> As a result of these societal attitudes, Acehnese women tend to become involved in arts activities only as a

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<sup>518</sup> Yusrizal Ibrahim, "Elly Zuarni: Meniti Seni di Tengah Badai Aceh," *Journal of Indonesian Performing Arts* 12(2003-2004), 161-62.



“hobby.” Though to be sure, more efforts should be made to ensure that Acehese women have equal opportunity to pursue Acehese dance as a professional activity, my analysis suggests that dancing as a “hobby” may provide a kind of intimate, nonjudgmental atmosphere that professional dance activities cannot offer, and can be just as significant for Acehese women.

Third, the Acehese dance rehearsals and the initial TELA workshops offered a space in which all participants could share their opinions and contribute equally to their final goal, whether this was of a fifteen-minute dance set or a series of polished scenes. As I mentioned earlier, many of the TELA teens lacked outlets where their opinions were valued and taken seriously; instead, the participants were accustomed to having their ideas dismissed by adults who “talked down” to them or put them “in their place.” In the first eight weeks of the TELA workshops, however, the participants were given a chance to express their frustrations during check-ins, to experiment with creative expression during games and exercises, and to choose and develop their own scene. Similarly, performers in the Acehese dance rehearsals (with the exception of Pak Uki’s dance class) had a chance to share their opinions about particular choreographies and movements. These opinions were not only expressed verbally, but in many cases, were tested out physically, with the dancers rearranging themselves to accommodate the vision of one of their group members. Being able to actually see or feel what one individual had in mind was a fundamental aspect of the TELA workshops and performances, in which individuals would “replace” one another to achieve their separate visions. My observations suggest that this kind of physical experimentation with ideas facilitates collective decision-making and promotes empathy among performers.

Finally, because the Acehese dance rehearsals and the first half of the TELA workshop created a safe, fun, and nonjudgmental space in which all participants contributed equally, these

rehearsals offered individuals a kind of support group, in which they were free to expose their insecurities and could be comforted by their peers. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Acehese students who traveled to Jakarta or Yogyakarta often found a sense of community in these rehearsal spaces, where they would meet friends who experienced similar hardships in the diaspora. TELA participants also saw the Friday night sessions as an opportunity to vent about their week's frustrations and to share their personal "ruptures" with the rest of the group. However, not all frustrations can be communicated verbally. Through sculpting ourselves into silent images or embodying others' within theatrical exercises, TELA participants were able to empathize with one another on a physical and emotional level that would not have been possible through verbal discussion alone.

These same benefits were not as apparent in Pak Uki's dance classes at IKJ and in the final weeks of TELA. As the sole instructor of the course, Pak Uki was responsible for making decisions about the structure of the class and the specific dances the students learned. He was also responsible for evaluating their progress. As a result, the students ultimately had to defer to his decisions and may have felt pressure throughout the classes to perform correctly. Similarly, in the final weeks of TELA, the jokers held greater authority over the sessions and focused the participants on getting their scenes "right" for the performance. Within these weeks, then, participants had fewer opportunities for creative experimentation and collective decision-making.

My analysis thus suggests that performance activities like Acehese dance rehearsals and TELA can be "healing" when participants feel that they are in a safe space with peers they can trust, when participants are free to share their ideas and to experiment with new forms of physical expression, and when the pressures of performance—executing movements "correctly" or following the demands of a single "leader"—are minimized. As I discussed in Chapter 3, I

understand healing to be a “multidimensional” and “dynamic process of recovering from a trauma or illness by working toward realistic goals, restoring function, and regaining a personal sense of balance and peace.”<sup>519</sup> In this sense, Acehnese dance rehearsals and TELA workshops may be healing for conflict survivors, tsunami survivors, or other individuals who have suffered an identifiable trauma.

However, my analysis also suggests that the significance of performance rehearsals extends beyond the realm of healing and can benefit individuals who are not necessarily recovering from trauma or illness. For example, the kinds of issues with which TELA participants struggle are not viewed as problems in need of solutions, or traumas in need of healing, but as “ruptures” that demand constant questioning and deconstruction. For Boal, “the goal of the Theatre of the Oppressed is not then to create calm, equilibrium, but rather to create disequilibrium which prepares the way for action. Its goal is to *dynamise*.”<sup>520</sup> By transforming personal stories into scenes that the audiences and actors can discuss collectively, theater becomes a communal activity through which alternative endings and tactics are proposed. Together, audience members and actors experiment with tactics that can help them to confront a variety of oppressions within their everyday lives.

Although the Acehnese dance rehearsals did not invite dancers to literally embody the traumas or “ruptures” of others in the way that TELA encourages participants to do, the dance rehearsals did offer a place in which various tactics were presented. In these spaces, dancers learn to build friendships and trust their peers, to empathize with one another, to laugh at their mistakes, and to engage in collective decision-making. They also learn how to let down their guard and be “silly,” or to experiment freely with new bodily movements. These kinds of

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<sup>519</sup> Clarissa Hsu et al., “Healing in Primary Care: A Vision Shared by Patients, Physicians, Nurses, and Clinical Staff,” *Annals of Family Medicine* 6 (2008): 307-314.

<sup>520</sup> Boal, *Rainbow of Desire*, 72.

“tactics” may be particularly useful to Acehese women living in a conservative society that discourages them from sharing their opinions and exploring new physical movements. In this way, Acehese dance rehearsals are significant for Acehese women not only for the healing opportunities they may provide, but also in equipping practitioners with a variety of tactics that will serve them in their everyday struggles.

**CHAPTER 6**  
**Looking Back, Moving Forward:**  
**Reflections on Trauma, Gender, and Acehese Performance**

I began my dissertation research with the belief that traditional dance, music, and theater practices could be and had been an important resource for Acehese survivors of the 1976-2005 GAM conflict and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. I quickly realized, however, that focusing on these two events of highly “visible” trauma would divulge only a fraction of the story of how traditional performance continues to hold meaning for Acehese today. By expanding my research to investigate constructions of Acehese identity within histories of Aceh and performance practices, the significance of traditional performance for Acehese living in Jakarta, societal attitudes toward female Acehese performers, and the dynamics of teaching and rehearsing Acehese dance, I discovered a much more a complex tale concerning the intersections of trauma, gender, and performance in Acehese communities.

In this chapter I return to my initial research question, offering an assessment of traditional Acehese performance as a tool for resisting trauma. Next, I speculate on the possibilities of using traditional performance to serve the needs of Acehese communities in the future. How have efforts to incorporate performance into trauma recovery activities transformed the ways in which Acehese view their traditional arts practices? What obstacles continue to impede the development of the arts in Aceh? What opportunities exist for Acehese women to challenge gender biases within the arts and within Acehese society? Rather than provide any definitive answers, my aim in this “concluding” chapter is to illuminate the many questions that remain and to inspire further discussion of trauma, gender, and the arts in Aceh.

**LOOKING BACK**

My dissertation has explored several instances in which traditional performance has been an important “tactic,” helping Acehese address feelings of trauma resulting from the conflict,

the tsunami, or “everyday” hardships. However, I have also outlined several situations in which performance fell short of providing all of the tools necessary for individuals to successfully resist trauma. This section summarizes my main findings regarding the efficacy of traditional Acehnese performance as a “healing” mechanism.

First, traditional performance can be significant to Acehnese as an “identity emblem,” or a symbol of cultural identity. As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, traditions, including performance practices, can be manipulated in ways that paint an incomplete or erroneous portrait of who Acehnese are. This can result in stereotypical representations, such as the notion that Acehnese are exceptionally violent and militant Muslims. At the same time, however, these traditions can be reimagined, reconstructed, or reinvented in ways that emphasize positive aspects of Acehnese identity, thus generating cultural pride. The notion that Acehnese are inclined to be “independent” and “heroic” warriors—traits that are referenced within specific performance practices—could be empowering for Acehnese trauma survivors in need of positive depictions of their cultural or ethnic identity. Emphasizing the beauty and the complexity of the Acehnese Saman dance, for example, can also allow non-Acehnese to understand Acehnese identity outside of the dominant narratives of violence, disaster, and destruction. As Winny, an Acehnese living in Yogyakarta, informed me, “by performing we can revive Aceh’s name... We can indirectly familiarize people with our culture, and people will recognize it. [They will say] ‘Oh, actually Aceh is as good as this.’ So they will have a different view of Aceh.”<sup>521</sup> In this

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<sup>521</sup> Winny, interview with author, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, May 9, 2010. Indonesian: “*Kalau menurut aku, mungkin kalau Aceh itu tidak terlalu diperdulikannya, karena terlalu jauh mungkin, dari pusat kota, dari pusat pemerintahan, misalnya Jakarta...Tapi kalau ada tarian itu jadi setidaknya Aceh terjadi, jadi tampil kembali dan menghidupkan kembali nama Aceh, gitu. Jadi karena menurut aku itu sangat penting. Jadi secara tidak langsung kita memperkenalkan budaya kita ke orang, dan orang bahkan mengenali, ‘O ternyata Aceh itu bagus ini.’ Jadi mereka kan punya pandangan lain Aceh.*”

way, performers of Acehese dance, music, of theater can resist oppressive representations of Acehese culture, providing their own construction of their cultural identity.

The fact that Acehese performance and Acehese identity are so intimately intertwined also makes it a particularly effective tool for conflict and trauma survivors in Aceh. As I suggested in Chapter 3, imported healing methods, such as conceptions of PTSD and other pathologizing treatments, do not always resonate with Acehese populations and can exacerbate feelings of confusion, isolation, and distress. In contrast, Acehese performance is a local tradition, something with which all Acehese are familiar even if they have never performed Acehese dance, music, or theater themselves. Because Acehese knew that the dances and songs they were invited to perform, or the theatrical shows they were invited to watch, originate from their own culture and are embedded within their own history, they may have felt more comfortable participating in these kinds of healing activities and felt a stronger sense of cultural pride. Acehese performance is also significant to diasporans for this same reason. Attending or participating in an Acehese performance in Jakarta or Yogyakarta can give Acehese living abroad a chance to connect with other Acehese diasporans or to feel that they have found an “Aceh-friendly” space. In this way, Acehese performance within the diaspora can offer Acehese a means to resist some of the difficulties they face abroad.

Acehese performance is not merely a reminder of one’s cultural or ethnic identity, however, and as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the physical and social aspects of Acehese performance contribute to its efficacy as a tool for trauma resistance. The closeness and “compactness” demanded of practitioners of Acehese dance, for example, can produce intimate friendships and facilitate community-building in ways that other kinds of performance practices cannot. Traditional Acehese dance is performed in groups of men and women—never

as a solo act—and requires dancers to work together to create an image of unity. In this sense, dancers do not simply sit or stand next to one another; instead, they are all part of a whole, working toward the same goal.

The physical demands of Acehnese dance not only help to generate friendships and foster support networks; they can also open up new ways of experiencing the body and in this way may be particularly significant for Acehnese women. Marjane Satrapi’s reflections on growing up in Iran during the Islamic revolution help to illustrate this point. Satrapi observes, “the regime had understood that one person leaving her house while asking herself, ‘Are my trousers long enough? Is my veil in place? Can my make-up be seen? Are they going to whip me?’ no longer asks herself, ‘Where is my freedom of thought? Where is my freedom of speech? My life, is it livable? What’s going on in the political prisons?’”<sup>522</sup> The amount of time and energy required of Satrapi to adhere to religious dress codes severely constrained both her physical freedom and her political consciousness. Feeling as though one is nothing more than a body—a body that could be raped or killed as a result of ongoing conflict, a body that might be harassed for wearing pants considered to be “too tight” by *syariah* police or civilians, or a body that is disrespected or made invisible within the realm of politics—undoubtedly influences one’s thoughts, one’s opinions, one’s sense of self, and one’s sense of what is possible. For Debra Yatim, the limitations that *syariah* law has placed on Acehnese women’s physical freedom can be observed in their performance of Acehnese dance. Yatim remarked, “if you’re not fixated with *syariah*, obviously you can explore your body movements...[In] Aceh, they’re more restrained. For example, sometimes the tempo gets into a crescendo. But they [in Aceh] do not go to that crescendo because it’s unseemly. They do not spread their legs, which means you don’t explore

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<sup>522</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 2003), 302.



anything.”<sup>523</sup> Spreading one’s legs, beating one’s chest, or performing interlocking dance movements within Acehnese dance may offer Acehnese women a new way of experiencing their physicality that in turn opens up new ways of thinking about gender, sexuality, age, religion, and other taken-for-granted aspects of daily life. In this way, Acehnese performance may offer practitioners a space to experience physical and mental freedom, and to reflect on the connections between body, movement and subjectivity.

If performance, in providing a space for practitioners to experiment with their physicality and, in turn, their subjectivity, encourages greater *creative* expression, it also offers an important alternative outlet for *traumatic* expression. As I discussed in Chapter 3, performance can be particularly significant for communicating traumatic feelings, since trauma resists conventional modes of expression and, for Cvetkovich, is often considered “unspeakable and unrepresentable.”<sup>524</sup> Even if Acehnese felt comfortable talking about their experiences of pain and loss, the conflict engendered a repressive environment in which openly discussing one’s fears, anxieties, or traumatic experiences could result in torture or death. One of the villagers for whom Agus Nur Amal performed explained, “during the conflict our society couldn’t gather together like this. If we met like this, it’s because we were forced by the army, to be gathered together and searched...But for a *hikayat* show, we can gather together and I can express my problems.”<sup>525</sup> Fozan Santa, one of the founders of the Acehnese arts group Tikar Pandan, also found that performers were able to discuss “anything and everything,” as long as it was voiced

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<sup>523</sup> Debra Yatim, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 12, 2010.

<sup>524</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>525</sup> Agus Nur Amal, interview with author, Jakarta, Indonesia, April 8, 2010. Indonesian: “Selama konflik kita masyarakat tidak bisa kumpul seperti ini. Kalaupun kita kumpul seperti ini, itu pasti karena dipaksa oleh tentara begitu, dikumpulkan untuk dicari...Nah, karena ada acara hikayat, kita bisa berkumpul dan saya bisa mengungkapkan masalah-masalah saya.”

through the language of the arts.<sup>526</sup> In this way, performance offers a means to resist the silence and shame surrounding traumatic expression, and provides a language, a space, or an “archive” in which to communicate experiences of individual and collective suffering.

Importantly, these opportunities that performance provides for resisting various forms of oppression are not limited to “formal” performance events—that is, performances that take place on a stage for an audience. My research reveals that rehearsals of Acehnese performance can also be an important space in which individuals learn tactics for dealing with trauma and other “everyday” challenges. Whereas formal performances may induce feelings of anxiety or fear about making a mistake, misrepresenting one’s culture, or embarrassing oneself or one’s peers, rehearsals offer an opportunity to perform Acehnese dance and music in a nonjudgmental setting where mistake-making often results in laughter, rather than critique. In addition, Acehnese dance rehearsals tend to be gender-segregated. This may be particularly important for Acehnese women who feel that they are perpetually subjected to the male gaze. In this way, rehearsals offer a “safe space” for Acehnese girls and women to gather together without male scrutiny.

My observations of Acehnese dance rehearsals also suggest that these are democratic spaces in which all dancers have a say regarding which dances to perform or how to transition from one dance to another. Providing an opportunity for Acehnese women to voice their opinions about and collectively decide upon specific aspects of their dance performance, dance rehearsals offer a means to resist prevailing societal attitudes toward Acehnese women’s roles in decision-making and positions of power. *Hikayat* performance also has the potential to disrupt societal assumptions about women’s leadership capabilities. Although Acehnese women may face social condemnation or other repercussions for their performance, *hikayat* can offer women

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<sup>526</sup> Fozan Santa, email message to author, October 11, 2009.

an opportunity to share their personal experiences with trauma and suffering, their political opinions, and their observations of Acehese history and social life.

At the same time that Acehese performance can offer practitioners an opportunity to represent or reconstruct cultural identity, to develop close friendships and build support networks, to resist conservative political and religious policies, to express feelings of trauma, pain, and suffering in a non-verbal way, and to gather together in a “safe space” that facilitates collective decision-making, Acehese performance is not always an effective tool for resisting trauma or other forms of oppression. First, efforts to incorporate performance into trauma recovery methods must acknowledge the ways in which experiences of trauma in Aceh are informed by individual histories and identities. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, many of the performance-based trauma recovery activities held in Aceh focused exclusively or primarily upon the tsunami as a source of trauma without acknowledging the years of violent conflict that many of these survivors had experienced. With no plans in place for developing a Conflict Museum or a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to formally acknowledge the conflict as a traumatic event, political leaders in Aceh and Jakarta have communicated to Acehese that the conflict is “a thing of the past,” or an event that should only be remembered as part of a particular narrative about Acehese identity. Performance activities that fail to acknowledge the conflict as a source of trauma may further suggest to Acehese that their memories of the conflict should be suppressed.

Performance can also fail to be an effective means of trauma recovery when gendered traumas—that is, the diverse ways in which Acehese men and women experience trauma and its effects—are not taken into account. My research suggests that the conflict, the tsunami, the implementation of *syariah* law, and societal attitudes toward Acehese women’s roles as leaders

and decision-makers have produced particular experiences of trauma for Acehese women that may cause women to feel unsafe, unwelcome, or disrespected within public space. As a result, Acehese girls and women do not approach performance activities with the same freedom or confidence as Acehese boys and men. While Mor Murtala, an Acehese dancer working with Taloe, observed that the girls who participated in Taloe's performance-based trauma recovery activities were "not as free as the guys," my conversations with female Acehese dancers in Jakarta reveal that these women are more concerned than male dancers about making mistakes and being negatively judged in their performances, which may cause them to lack confidence in their dancing abilities. Many of the performance-based trauma recovery activities I examined in Chapter 3 did not address these gendered differences in how Acehese approach and respond to public performance. Moreover, women were notably absent as instructors and performers within these programs, which may further convey to Acehese girls and women that performance is for men. Even if female participants felt comfortable performing in front of an audience, they are unlikely to view performance as a viable tool for trauma resistance in the future due to prevailing attitudes toward female performers. While female dancers in Aceh are accepted as long as their performance activities remain a "hobby" and do not extend beyond their university years, *hikayat* artists, like Cut Poh, may be considered mentally unstable by their community members and face social ostracism for their decisions to pursue performance.

The extent to which performers feel nervous or anxious about performing in public must also be taken into consideration in evaluating the efficacy of performance as a tool for trauma resistance. As I noted in my observations of the TELA rehearsals and performances, not all participants felt comfortable sharing their personal stories of abuse with an audience of strangers. For example, Elmira's reaction to the "Cop in the Head" exercise suggests that having to talk

about, act out, or otherwise perform one's experiences of trauma may re-traumatize individuals who are not yet ready to address their painful pasts. In this way, performance activities may be more upsetting than they are empowering.

Finally, the efficacy of performance as a tool for trauma resistance is directly influenced by funding, resources, and social support for the arts. For example, although UNESCO's performance workshops were able to provide structured activities to children living in the barracks and may have sparked their interest in the traditional arts, these workshops lasted only three months at a time and did not provide children with resources to sustain their arts practice. Without instruments or instructors available to them after UNESCO left Aceh, it is unlikely these children will continue to perform Acehese dance or music in the future. Individuals who wish to pursue performance activities are further disadvantaged by the fact that there are few opportunities to formally study performance in Aceh. Trauma recovery activities that do not provide a means for children to continue their arts practices may inadvertently suggest that feelings of pain and suffering should be "resolved" or overcome once the trauma recovery activities have concluded.

### **MOVING FORWARD**

The above assessment suggests that the efficacy of performance as a tool for trauma resistance depends not only upon practical considerations, such as funding, resources, and the ability to implement a long-term approach, but also upon attention to individual experiences of trauma, social attitudes toward women's roles, and support for the arts. To what extent can performance continue to address the needs of Acehese trauma survivors? Have any efforts been made to address the limitations of performance as a tool for trauma resistance? This section

examines the future possibilities for using performance for trauma recovery, expanding arts education, and combating gender inequality in Acehese communities.

### **Arts Activism and Education**

Two years ago, when I first witnessed a Taloe dance rehearsal for children who were tsunami survivors, I was accompanied by two men from Caritas France who were evaluating the rehearsal to determine whether or not their organization would continue to fund Taloe. When I returned to Aceh in November 2010, I discovered that Taloe had lost this important source of funding and was no longer active. Like many other activities that developed as part of Aceh's tsunami reconstruction process, Taloe's performance workshops were given a 5-year timeline. This period also coincided with the dissolution of BRR (*Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi*), the Agency for the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Aceh and Nias.

Tikar Pandan, however, continues to offer resources for conflict and tsunami survivors. In December 2010, Tikar Pandan performers collaborated with an arts group from Japan to develop a theater workshop for children similar to the TV Eng-Ong performance I described in Chapter 3. This workshop aimed to educate participants about disaster preparedness and encouraged them to reflect on their experiences of the tsunami. In addition, Tikar Pandan members plan to create their own Conflict Museum to contest the silence and the "official" narratives surrounding the GAM separatist rebellion. For Fozan Santa, creating a Conflict Museum will help to prevent the erasure of this event from Indonesian historical memory as well as the revision of this history, which views the conflict as evidence of an Acehese heroic, violent, or "rebellious" spirit.<sup>527</sup> Focusing on individual stories and memories, the museum will present alternative narratives of the conflict.

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<sup>527</sup> Fozan Santa, personal communication with author, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, November 24, 2010.

Tikar Pandan also has a number of ongoing projects that aim to address what they have identified as important social concerns in Aceh. For example, Tikar Pandan developed a workshop in which community members were invited to openly discuss the implementation and function of *syariah* law in Acehnese society. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Acehnese were given the right to implement *syariah* law based on the erroneous assumption that the separatist conflict would end with this concession. Although many Acehnese are unhappy with the way in which *syariah* has been enforced and feel that it is unnecessary within a society that follows Islamic practices in its own way, the law remains in place and there have not been any serious efforts to contest or remove it. The Tikar Pandan workshop thus provided a forum for Acehnese to articulate their diverse opinions toward *syariah* and its place in contemporary Aceh.

Tikar Pandan also conducted a workshop that aimed to raise awareness about gender and culture in Aceh. The three-day workshop, which took place in August 2008, invited community members to participate in several “free-write” exercises, in which they wrote about the topics of gender and culture in any genre of their choosing, such as fiction, poetry, or formal essays. For Nasya, an Acehnese woman in her early twenties, this workshop was the first time she had ever given serious thought to the significance of gender identity in her daily life. At the end of the workshop, Tikar Pandan published the participants’ reflections in an edited book.

Finally, Tikar Pandan has attempted to facilitate communal discussions about religion, gender, culture, violence, and trauma in Aceh through regular film screenings held at the Tikar Pandan offices. Because the tsunami destroyed movie theaters in Banda Aceh, these screenings offer a rare opportunity for Acehnese to collectively watch movies in a setting that also permits open discussion about the films. Moreover, the Tikar Pandan screenings present films that may not be permitted for public viewing by Aceh’s *syariah* police due to sexual content, violence, or

references to Indonesia's history of human rights abuses. Many of the films shown are requested by local university students. However, Tikar Pandan also holds formal screenings, such as the Arab Film Festival, which took place December 20-24, 2010.

Fortunately, local NGOs are not the only organizations in Aceh to recognize the significance of the arts in effecting social change. The Tsunami and Disaster Mitigation Research Center (TDMRC), a research center based at the University of Syiah Kuala that aims to reduce disaster risk and educate the community about disaster preparedness, recently began to integrate the arts into their tsunami reconstruction program. Since its inception in 2005, TDMRC has helped to rebuild Islamic schools in Aceh that were destroyed by the tsunami. Though getting the schools up and running was TDMRC's first priority, the center has recently implemented an extracurricular arts and cultures class in which students learn dance and music from local artists. In the fall of 2010 TDMRC finished rebuilding its first school, M. Alliah Negr High School, and instituted an arts program in which students learned traditional Acehese dances, including Ranup Lampuan and Meuseukat. However, the students also developed *kreasi baru* (new works) that reflected their experiences with the tsunami, such as "Tsunami Dance."



Students of M. Alliah Negr High School perform "Tsunami Dance" (Aceh, Indonesia 2010)



The students performed these dances during the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual International Workshop and Expo on Sumatra Tsunami Disaster and Recovery, which I attended from November 21-22, 2010. After the performance, the principal of M. Alliah Negri informed the audience that one-third of the students at the school were orphans as a result of the tsunami, including many of the dancers. He also explained that the students created the “Tsunami Dance” in order to pass on their memories of the tsunami and their knowledge about disaster response through the arts. This suggests that TDMRC recognized traditional performance as an important educational resource. Through their efforts to use the arts to address issues that continue to affect Acehese communities, Tikar Pandan and TDMRC may help to raise awareness about the multiple functions of the performing arts. Suggesting that traditional Acehese performance is more than just a form of entertainment, these organizations may help garner greater support for arts programs and performance activities.

Unfortunately, existing arts courses and recreational performance troupes in Aceh are not always seen as potential resources for trauma recovery or education. For example, the development of a formal arts program in Aceh similar to the Jakarta Arts Institute continues to be impeded by a lack of community support and debates over funding. However, in July 2010, Ari Jauhari, a music education professor at Syiah Kuala University, opened the Prodigy Music School, the first of its kind in Aceh. Although this school does not yet hold exams or offer a degree for matriculating students, it does offer classes in voice, drumming, piano, guitar, violin, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, and xylophone. The Prodigy Music School consists of four music rehearsal rooms with soundproof walls, a small music library, and a large room for lectures and musical performances. All of the equipment, including instruments, books, desks, and chairs, was acquired from the Yogyakarta Arts Institute (ISI Yogya). By posting flyers, handing out

brochures, and giving presentations at local schools in Banda Aceh, Ari spread awareness about his Prodigy Music School, and by November 2010, fifty students were enrolled. Although the courses offered currently focus on Western instruments and music theory, Ari hopes to include lessons in traditional dance, music, and theater in the future.

By creating formal arts classes to develop an interest in the arts, TDMRC and Ari's Prodigy Music School suggest that institutional support may be necessary to transform societal attitudes toward the significance of the arts in contemporary Aceh. However, institutions can also restrict the development of arts programs. For example, although Muhammadiyah University in Banda Aceh permitted the formation of an all-male dance troupe, the school rejected the requests of several female students to create their own dance troupe, claiming that women were forbidden from participating in band or dance performance. Although the school would not specify the reasons for its decision, Sita, a student at Muhammadiyah University, believed that the institution's affiliation with the conservative Islamic party, PKS (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*), had something to do with it.<sup>528</sup> This suggests that even if Acehnese institutions offer greater support for the arts, they may not support women's involvement in performance activities.

### **Feminist Futures**

What opportunities exist in Aceh for challenging these kinds of conservative attitudes toward female performers? What efforts have Acehnese women made to combat the notion that women are "unfit" to be political leaders or the exclusion of women's voices from community decisions? What does "feminism" look like in Aceh today?

These questions were partly answered for me during my last trip to Aceh when I had the

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<sup>528</sup> Sita, personal communication with author, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, December 8, 2010.

opportunity to attend the “Aceh Women’s Award Ceremony,” held at the Sultan Selim Centre in Banda Aceh on November 25, 2010. At first glance, the “ceremony” appeared to be an exciting retaliation to the view that Acehese women cannot hold leadership positions in Acehese society. In addition to formally recognizing the efforts of Umi Hanisah, the Chair of the West Aceh Women’s Ulama Association, to provide counseling and legal services to women survivors of violence, the one-day event also featured talks from invited panelists—among them religious scholars, women’s rights activists, and university professors. In this way, panelists and audience members engaged in a collective discussion concerning Acehese women’s roles as leaders and their access to positions of political power.

However, not all Acehese women felt that this award ceremony was effective. As Nasya correctly observed, all of the community members attending or participating in the ceremony shared the same vision for Acehese women’s rights and equality. Though the ceremony certainly offered community members an opportunity to discuss their concerns, Nasya believed that these arguments would be more effective if addressed to conservative politicians or religious leaders. Further, Nasya felt that the ceremony gave the Acehese government an opportunity to show its support for Acehese women’s rights without having to change any of its policies. Devoting one day to recognizing the achievements of one Acehese woman, Nasya explained, would not grant Acehese women greater political representation or inclusion in “real” political decisions taking place outside of the Sultan Selim Centre.

How, then, can Acehese women begin to dismantle the barriers they face in entering positions of decision-making power? For Nasya and Sita, conversations about gender equality and women’s rights in Aceh must take place beyond the walls of conferences, universities, and NGO offices. Further, these conversations must occur in a language that is accessible to all

community members. For example, Nasya believes that although most Acehese women support efforts to combat domestic violence, rape, and other “visible” forms of oppression, they do not understand how voting for female candidates would improve their lives and have not been encouraged to question less visible forms of gender inequality. Nasya explained, “most Acehese women believe that it is their destiny to stay at home and become housewives. Acehese culture tells them that this is their fate, and they should not complain.”<sup>529</sup> However, Nasya also explained that using “Western” feminist arguments to contest this ideology is ineffective in Acehese communities because it does not speak to Acehese women’s specific experiences and struggles. Instead, Nasya argues, “feminism” in Aceh must be articulated in terms that are familiar to Acehese women, a tactic that several religious scholars have already employed. For example, by reinterpreting Qu’ranic passages in ways that support women’s rights, rather than dismissing Islam entirely or minimizing the significance of religion in Acehese society, scholars such as Eka Srimulyani have argued for gender equality while upholding Acehese traditions and validating Acehese culture. Nasya and Sita have adopted a similar approach within their communities. Nasya explained, “I start with a small group of friends when we’re just hanging out. For example, if we’re at a café I might say to them, ‘Have you ever thought about why women wear high heels? Do you know where the idea comes from?’ And then they will start thinking about how high heels actually benefit men so they can look at women’s butts. Or I might start with a stereotype about women, or men, and we try to deconstruct it.”<sup>530</sup> By generating a discussion among her friends about issues that they can relate to, Nasya hopes to encourage more of her peers to consider how gender identity has influenced

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<sup>529</sup> Nasya, personal communication with author, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, November 30, 2010.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

their lives and to become aware of the many different forms of gender inequality that exist in Aceh today.

Nasya's reflections on how to go about enacting the change she wants to see in her community—that is, her ideas for how to combat gender discrimination and to develop an organic Acehnese “feminist” movement—resonate with my own observations of how performance can serve as an effective tool for resisting trauma and other forms of oppression. As a tradition that is embedded within Acehnese culture, Acehnese performance offers a “language” with which Acehnese are familiar and readily “speaks to” shared historical memories and experiences. For feminist ideas to reach Acehnese women, Nasya argues, these ideas must also connect with Acehnese women's experiences and their identities as Muslim Acehnese. Of course, Acehnese performance, as a “tradition,” is not merely a *reflection* of cultural identity, but also provides an opportunity to reconstruct and re-imagine what it means to be Acehnese. Acehnese dances that portray peace, harmony, and unity, for example, can contest prevailing narratives that link Aceh with images of violence and destruction. Similarly, women's rights activists in Aceh challenge ideas about women's “traditional” roles as mothers and housewives by pointing to Aceh's “tradition” of powerful female figures, such as Cut Nyack Dhien and Aceh's sultanas. In this way, they suggest that including women in political decision-making and granting them positions of power is not a foreign concept, but one that has already been successfully implemented in Aceh. Finally, traditional performance has been used to educate audiences and spark communal dialogue about human rights violations, political corruption, *syariah* law, and other important social issues. Likewise, Nasya's informal conversations with her friends encourage them to critically reflect on their experiences as gendered subjects and to stay vigilant of acts of gender discrimination within their daily lives.

Tradition, then, offers a powerful resource for Acehnese hoping to change the world around them. Whether they are looking for a way to combat pain and suffering, to challenge societal norms, to raise awareness about oppression, or to imagine a better future, Acehnese suggest that it is through a constant negotiation with their traditions—including their performance practices—that they learn the art of resistance.

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