

9 Images of Violence and Piety in Aceh

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1 Introduction

On 23 February 2010 people in Aceh were surprised by the news that a training camp for aspiring jihadis, or ‘terrorists’ as they were simply called in local media, had been discovered near Jantho in the district of Aceh Besar, the rural area surrounding the provincial capital of Banda Aceh. An initial effort by the police to make arrests turned out to be disastrous and a large number escaped into the nearby mountains. In the subsequent attempt to round up the group, several members of the security forces were killed.² Three innocent civilians were also killed, two of them because they had been mistaken for terrorists and the third because he was hit by a stray bullet.³ Wary of further escalation, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono stated that these terrorists were not connected to GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or Free Aceh Movement), the Acehnese separatist organisation that was formally disbanded after the signing of a peace treaty with the Indonesian government in August 2005.⁴ Ultimately, it took more than a month to kill or arrest all of the alleged terrorists and affiliated members of the cell. Among them

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2 ‘Baku tembak berkecamuk di Seulimeum’, *Serambi Indonesia*, 5 March 2010; ‘Pengepungan berlanjut’, *Serambi Indonesia*, 6 March 2010; ‘4 Jenazah dievakuasi dari Medan Tempur’, *Serambi Indonesia*, 7 March 2010.

3 ‘Pengepungan Jantho, satu warga tewas’, *Acehkita.com*, 23 February 2010; ‘Kami hanya cari ikan’, *Acehkita.com*, 24 February 2010; ‘2 warga tertembak, Polda harus bertanggungjawab’, *Acehkita.com*, 24 February 2010; ‘Lagi, seorang warga tewas tertembak’, *Acehkita.com*, 4 March 2010 (accessed 14 March 2010).

4 ‘Teroris di Aceh tak terkait GAM’, *Serambi Indonesia*, 6 March 2010.

was Dulmatin, the most wanted terrorist in Southeast Asia, and the leader of the group. He was shot dead on 9 March, in an internet café in Tangerang, Banten.⁵

In the following months more information became gradually available.⁶ The group, it turned out, had split off from the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an infamous jihadi organisation commonly linked to Al Qaeda and led by the radical cleric Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. Apparently, Dulmatin, one of the masterminds behind the deadly terrorist attack on Bali in 2002, had become alienated from the movement. Since 2006 he and a number of like-minded persons had concluded that the jihadi struggle had gone astray, and that it was necessary to develop 'a new programme that could unite the jihadi community'.⁷ The training camp in Aceh revealed the existence of a new coalition which, besides Dulmatin, included well-known radical Islamists from Java and elsewhere, as well as a handful of local Acehnese who were sympathetic to the jihadi cause. The group was heavily armed and had considerable knowledge of the terrain around Jantho. When the police secured the site of the training camp they encountered weapons, books about 'global jihad', and DVDs related to the Bali bombings. During the investigation the police 'speculated that the militants were preparing to fight in Palestine and did not have a domestic Indonesian agenda'.⁸

The choice of Aceh to start a training camp was not particularly smart. It appears that Dulmatin and his group were looking for a 'secure base' for their operations. They chose Aceh as a location, first, because the successful guerrilla actions of GAM had made Aceh look like suitable terrain for underground activities and, second, because Aceh seemed like fruitful ground for recruitment as a result of the local implementation of Sharia law.⁹ Both assumptions were wrong. War-torn Aceh was not a great place to walk around with guns. Attempts to involve known radical religious teachers failed hopelessly, at least partly because of the uncompromising way in which the leaders of the cell rejected Acehnese

5 International Crisis Group, 'Indonesia: Jihadi surprise in Aceh', Asia Report No. 189, 20 April 2010, 12.

6 An authoritative analysis can be found in *ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 1.

8 US Embassy, 'Aceh police action nets four militants, estimated 50 at large in jungle', http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10JAKARTA254_a.html (accessed 3 November 2013). Indeed, this was most likely one of the coalition's goals, although the plan to send trained Indonesian jihadis to Gaza had apparently already been cancelled in early 2009. See International Crisis Group, 'Indonesia: Jihadi surprise in Aceh', 9.

9 *Ibid.*, 7–8.



Hills around Jantho where the confrontation with alleged terrorists took place

cultural practices as ‘un-Islamic’. This does not mean that no Acehnese were involved in the group. A list of suspected members, compiled a few months later by the International Crisis Group, counted 18 people from Aceh out of a total of 78.¹⁰

Aceh is often seen as a place where radical Islamist movements are less influential than in other parts of Indonesia. This is true, in the sense that the separatist conflict made it difficult for such groups to establish themselves. At the same time, this view risks reproducing some simplistic stereotypes, namely that the Acehnese are inherently conservative, pre-occupied with their own territorial concerns, and hostile or ‘immune’ to outside influences. Stereotypes like these coloured the ways in which both domestic and international media analysed the ‘terrorist’ issue. Some media outlets wrote about the possible links between the discovery of the jihadi camp, expressions of fundamentalism in Aceh and Sharia law.¹¹ Other, less suggestive reports came to a diametrically opposite conclusion, emphasising that this group came from outside Aceh, and quoting Acehnese political and religious leaders

¹⁰ Ibid., ‘Appendix B’, 19–22.

¹¹ See, e.g., this highly suggestive report on the website of Radio Australia, <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/asia/2010-05-04/jihadi-terrorist-cell-uncovered-in-aceh/189854> (accessed 3 November 2013).

who stated that the group would never find support among the Acehnese, whose Islamic teachings were peaceful.¹² Both views, in my opinion, are problematic.

When the training camp was discovered in February 2010, I was living in Aceh in order to conduct fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation.¹³ Coincidentally, one of the clashes between the alleged 'terrorists' and the security forces took place in a forest relatively close to my field site, a rural village in Aceh Besar, which I will refer to by the pseudonym of 'Jurong'. This situation provided me with an unexpected opportunity to record the villagers' first reactions to these events at a time when it was still very unclear what kind of people the authorities were dealing with, what their motivations were, and how the violence would end. Interestingly, these reactions varied widely. Many people were afraid that the conflict might flare up again. Others expressed their anger at what must certainly be 'outsiders' whose presence was disrupting Aceh's fragile peace. Again others sympathised with the apparent motivations of the 'terrorists', even if they did not agree with the use of violence or with the choice of Aceh as a base. At the same time, there was considerable uncertainty and ambivalence about what to believe, or how to make sense of the situation. Safwan, a 43-year-old civil servant, after expressing his surprise and speculating whether the situation might get out of hand and become 'political', explained to me that most of all he felt 'confused' (*bingung*).

In this chapter I argue that in order to understand these divergent emotions and explanations, it is important to investigate, first, the ways in which different 'images of violence and piety' have developed over a long period of time and in the context of Acehnese history and society, and second, what impact these images have on society today.¹⁴ As such, this case provides an opportunity to address a specific problem that has been weighing on my mind for some time. The Acehnese are known, stereotypically, as a particularly pious and militant people.

12 See, e.g., the Jakarta Post, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/03/09/aceh-denies-any-links-with-terrorism.html> (accessed 3 November 2013).

13 David Kloos, *Becoming better Muslims: Religious authority and ethical improvement in Aceh, Indonesia*, PhD dissertation, VU University Amsterdam, 2013.

14 This chapter does not contain an argument about 'religious violence'. William Cavanaugh convincingly demonstrated the nonsensical nature of this label, arguing that it commonly functions to deflect attention from, or brush under the carpet, the 'secular' roots of violence, without supplying valid reasons for doing so, see William Cavanaugh, *The myth of religious violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

This image is old, and it is persistent. It has been reproduced again and again in written sources, such as official documents, books and newspapers, but also in visual sources, such as photographs and films, and in 'traditional' art performances such as dance. It is important to approach these images critically. They are distortions of the ways in which people in Aceh experience their religion. They conceal the contradictions and ambiguities that inform lived reality. They are ideological, and often say more about political agendas than people's everyday lives. At the same time, however, anyone who has spent time in Aceh will acknowledge that these stereotypes, although highly problematic in an analytical sense, have a particular purchase in social reality. In other words, the images of violence and piety are not just constructions created 'on the outside'. They are present in Aceh and they must be taken into account if we want to understand how people address the question of 'what it means' to be Acehnese. Of course, images of violence and piety do not determine people's thoughts and actions. Yet the question is important because it holds implications both for the way in which we address trends in local politics (including, but not limited to, the implementation of Islamic law), and the complex processes of social and cultural change. This chapter traces images of violence and piety in Aceh, asking, first, how they manifested themselves in the specific context of Jurong in early 2010 and, second, how they are rooted in and are drawn from the multi-interpretable, discursive strands that make up Acehnese history.

The structure is as follows. The first chapter offers the historical context. The second part moves to the events of 2010, focusing on the ways in which the scarcity of official information, rumours and the village talk revealed particular images of violence and piety. In the third part I go back into history to trace some of these images, focusing on the myriad meanings they have been given in different periods and by different segments of Acehnese society. I will focus on the idea of 'holy struggle', which is sometimes referred to through the Islamic concept of jihad, and sometimes by (less sensitive) Indonesian language alternatives such as *perjuangan suci*. In the conclusion I return to the problem of stereotypes in Acehnese society.

2 Violence and Religion as Defining Aspects of Acehnese History

Islam has played a central role in the formation of Acehnese identity ever since at some point around the turn of the 20th century it became

a meaningful category for ethnic self-representation.¹⁵ Today, 'being Acehnese' is commonly understood as a combination of speaking (any dialect of) the Acehnese language, respecting a local variation of Acehnese customs (*adat*), adhering to Islam, and identifying, one way or another, with the Acehnese past.¹⁶ In the second half of the 20th century Acehnese ethnic identity became increasingly politicised in a development closely connected to the region's violent history.

The Dutch colonial army invaded Aceh in 1873, in a move legitimised as an attempt to eradicate piracy in the Straits of Malacca, but today commonly placed by historians in the context of imperial conquest.¹⁷ What the Dutch expected to be a brief campaign turned into a grinding war. Although the Acehnese Sultan capitulated in 1903, there continued to be localised but intense eruptions of violence until the Japanese occupation ended Dutch rule in 1942.¹⁸ In 1891, the Dutch orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje discovered that the leaders of 'Acehnese' resistance perceived the struggle as a 'holy war'. Behind the line of concentration a bitter conflict over arms, resources and authority had broken out between representatives of the traditional aristocracy (the *uleebalang*) and a group of religious scholars (the *ulama*). In the 1890s it was the ulama, rather than the uleebalang who had come to lead the war, framed it as a jihad and, as a result, gained unprecedented authority among the population. In response, Snouck Hurgronje advised the Dutch generals openly to

15 As Edward Aspinall has written, 'there is little evidence from before the twentieth century of a widely shared, conscious Acehnese identity, and there is even less to suggest that such an identity was a basis for mobilization, even during war': Edward Aspinall, *Islam and nation: Separatist rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 20. In the vernacular literature predating the 20th century the word 'Aceh' refers not to a defined physical space, but to Banda Aceh, the harbour on the tip of Sumatra and the site of the Sultan's palace (*kraton*). The important identity marker for ordinary people then was the Islamic religion and their status as residents of a particular village or fiefdom. It was the Dutch colonial government which came to speak of Aceh as a 'province' with particular cultural and religious characteristics. See Kloos, *Becoming better Muslims*.

16 According to official statistics, 98 per cent of circa 4 million inhabitants of Aceh province consider themselves Muslim, while the large majority is ethnically Acehnese.

17 See, e.g. Nicholas Tarling, *Imperialism in Southeast Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 135–144.

18 For a discussion see Paul van 't Veer, *De Atjeh-oorlog* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1969).

support the uleebalang, while at the same time ruthlessly persecuting the militant ulama and their followers.¹⁹

The Japanese occupation featured a reconfiguration of the political role of the ulama and the uleebalang. While the Dutch had experimented for some time with the co-optation of quiescent ulama, during the Japanese period this became common policy. After the defeat of the Japanese in the Pacific War, the tension between the two groups resulted in a civil war known, rather euphemistically, as the 'Social Revolution' (1945–1946). In this brief but intense confrontation the uleebalang were stripped of power, many of them being killed, incarcerated or put to flight.²⁰ The strengthened role of the ulama – and their role in the resistance against the Dutch – was recognised in 1945 by the Indonesian Republican government, which appointed Daud Beureueh, a charismatic and highly influential reform-minded ulama, as the governor of Aceh province.²¹ Daud Beureueh aspired to create an Islamic polity in Aceh.²² However, his attempts to raise the status of Islamic law failed, partly as a result of internal feuds between Aceh's political and religious leaders, and partly because of a lack of support from the government in Jakarta. In 1951 Aceh was incorporated into the province of North Sumatra.

Political developments in the second half of the 20th century were dominated by two subsequent rebellions. In 1953 a radicalised faction of ulama led by former governor Daud Beureueh started an armed rebellion against the central government in Jakarta under the banner of Darul Islam ('Abode of Islam'). The revolt, which was aimed at transforming Indonesia into an Islamic state, ended in 1962 after the government had

19 Snouck Hurgronje's advice was laid down in the infamous 'Atjeh-rapport' (Aceh report). See Emile Gobée and Cornelis Adriaanse, *Ambtelijke adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje 1889–1936*. 3 volumes ('s Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1957–1965.), Vol. 1, 47–125.

20 For a detailed discussion of this period see Anthony J.S. Reid, *The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979).

21 Daud Beureueh was the leader of the Persatuan Ulama-Ulama Seluruh Aceh (All-Acehnese Association of Ulama, PUSA). This organisation was founded in 1939 and played an important role in a rebellion against the Dutch colonial government in 1942 and the subsequent Japanese occupation. PUSA-affiliated ulama, including Daud Beureueh, were rewarded by the Japanese with official government functions, particularly in the domain of Islamic law, that used to be the jurisdiction of the uleebalang.

22 See, in particular, Eric E. Morris, *Islam and Politics in Aceh: a Study of Center-periphery Relations in Indonesia*. PhD dissertation, Cornell University (1983), 162–163.

restored Aceh's provincial status and promised the Acehnese autonomy in the fields of religion, customs and education.²³ In the 1970s however, ongoing centralisation and dissatisfaction with the central government's policy of concentrating the yields from natural resources in Jakarta led to a new rebellion. In 1976 Hasan di Tiro, an Acehnese businessman and diplomat hailing from a famous family of ulama, founded Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh Movement, GAM). The civil war between GAM and the Indonesian military escalated in the late 1980s, developing into a protracted conflict producing some of the worst atrocities in the history of the Indonesian Republic. GAM was based, at least partly, on the networks of Darul Islam. In contrast to its predecessor however, the movement developed a largely secular, ethno-nationalist ideology directed at separating Aceh from the Indonesian nation.²⁴

In 1999, a year after the Asian financial crisis heralded the fall of the New Order regime, Aceh was allowed by the government in Jakarta to implement a regional formulation of Sharia law as part of a new autonomy package amid hopes of ending the ongoing conflict. The initiative was rejected by GAM, which considered Jakarta's decision as a move to delegitimise the separatist movement.²⁵ The December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami hit Aceh with full force, destroying the provincial capital Banda Aceh and decimating the population living on or near the coast.²⁶ In the context of post-disaster reconstruction, a peace agreement

23 Connecting the struggle to the wider Darul Islam movement, the rebels pledged loyalty to the 'Islamic state of Indonesia' (NII) declared more than ten years earlier by Kartosuwiryo in West Java. For discussions of this period see Cornelis van Dijk, *Rebellion under the Banner of Islam: The Darul Islam in Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1981); Chiara Formichi, *Islam and the making of the nation: Kartosuwiryo and political Islam in twentieth-century Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2012); Nazaruddin Sjamsuddin, *The republican revolt: A study of the Acehnese rebellion* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985).

24 See Aspinall, *Islam and nation*.

25 See Law No. 44/1999 on the Special Status of the Province of Aceh; for a discussion of the stances of GAM and the Indonesian government see Aspinall, *Islam and Nation*, 209–217; Michelle A. Miller, *Rebellion and Reform in Indonesia: Jakarta's Security and Autonomy Policies in Aceh* (London: Routledge, 2009). For an analysis of the implementation, institutionalisation and current enforcement of Sharia law in Aceh see R. Michael Feener, *Shari'ah and social engineering: The implementation of Islamic law in contemporary Aceh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); R. Michael Feener, David Kloos and Annemarie Samuels (eds.), *Islam and the limits of the state: Reconfigurations of ritual, doctrine and community in contemporary Aceh* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

26 Estimates of the death toll vary between 130,000 and 200,000. A total of 167,000

was signed by GAM and the Indonesian government in August 2005. Since then, the rebel movement has been disarmed and turned into a political party, Partai Aceh (PA), which is currently in power both at the provincial level and in most districts. At the time of writing, PA, with the exception of some district heads and political entrepreneurs with populist inclinations, had not pushed for further expansion of the Sharia legal framework.

Ambiguity towards political Islam reflects GAM's earlier ideological positioning during the conflict. At the same time, it should be noted that the conflict made it difficult for (trans)national, revivalist, or radically Islamist groups to establish themselves here. For example, the revivalist Islamic Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Prosperous Justice Party, PKS), which has been quite successful at the national level, in the 2009 local elections won only 3.8 per cent of the votes, while Partai Aceh gained 46.9 per cent.²⁷ The conservative Islamic student movement Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (KAMMI), which established an Acehese branch in 1998, is vocal and visible, but plays a minor role in terms of membership. Radical Islamist movements, such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Front Pembela Islam (Front of the Defenders of Islam; FPI), have also had difficulty establishing themselves in Aceh.²⁸ My interlocutors explained this relative weakness in different ways. Some of

is the official number used in most government publications. For an in-depth analysis of the effects of the tsunami on Acehese society and the post-tsunami remaking of everyday life see Annemarie Samuels, *After the tsunami: The remaking of everyday life in Banda Aceh, Indonesia*, PhD dissertation (Leiden University, 2012).

27 Mawardi Ismail et al., 'Local political parties in Indonesia: the Aceh test case', Policy Brief, Australia Indonesia Governance Research Partnership (Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University, Canberra, 2009). The PKS, founded in 2002 as the successor of the 'Justice Party' (PK, 1998), has been inspired by the ideology of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and won 7.9 per cent of the votes in the 1999 parliamentary elections. At the time of writing, the party was part of the government coalition of President Susilo Bambang Yudhuyono.

28 See Aspinall, *Islam and nation*, 193–199; Marzi Afriko, 'Syariat Islam dan radikalisme massa: melacak jejak awal kehadiran FPI di Aceh', in Arskal Salim and Adlin Sila (eds.), *Serambi Mekkah yang berubah: views from within* (Tangerang: Pustaka Alvabet bekerja sama dengan Aceh Research Training Institute, 2010), 19–56. Hizbut Tahrir, a transnational organisation which strives for the restoration of the Caliphate, claims to have been in Aceh for many years. However, friends at the campus told me that they have seen people wave the Hizbut Tahrir flag only since the 2004 tsunami.

them suggested that Aceh is 'already very Islamic' and that the Acehnese did not need groups 'from outside' to tell them how to practise their faith. Others stated that radical Islamist groups might be seen as disturbing the fragile state of peace.

Suffice it to say, then, that the inability of Islamist groups to win much support resonates with a more general observation that many ordinary Acehnese tend to be hesitant, indifferent and, in some cases, hostile to 'political Islam' or religious activism more broadly. Such stances and sentiments are seldom highlighted – or even recognised – in the scholarly literature. This is because most studies about Aceh (and Islamic societies more generally) focus squarely on the domain of the state, 'civil society', and the practices and policies of formal institutions.²⁹ In the next section I move to the ethnographic context of Jurong at a time in which, as one of my interlocutors cynically noted, soldiers and terrorists had come to their backyards to 'play around with weapons'.

3 Global Jihad, or 'Money and Guns'?

On 23 February 2010, just before noon, the well-informed news website *Acehkita.com* reported shooting between police and an 'armed group' the night before, in a forest near Jantho, the main town and administrative centre of the rural district of Aceh Besar. The group was said to consist of about 50 heavily armed people. Three of them were arrested. The others escaped. In the early evening the website stated that a special operations police brigade (Brigade Mobil, or Brimob) was 'combing' the mountainous area near Jantho, which was by now referred to as the 'suspected location of a group affiliated to Jamaah Islamiyah'. More than 300 police troops were deployed. A few hours later it was reported that, in the midst of the raid, a 'civilian' was shot dead by accident while another (his son) was severely wounded. The two, fellow villagers told reporters, had gone out fishing.³⁰

The remaining 'terrorists', as they were now invariably called, managed to escape to the forested hills at the foot of Seulawah Mountain, the watershed which separates the Aceh River valley from the north coast lowlands. Despite the rumours of Jamaah Islamiyah, for some time the authorities appeared to be unsure about the identity of the group. On 25

29 For an elaboration of this argument see Kloos, *Becoming better Muslims*.

30 'Polisi baku tembak di Jantho', *Acehkita.com*, 23 February 2010; 'Menysir Jamaah Islamiyah', *Acehkita.com*, 23 February 2010; 'Pengepungan Jantho, Satu warga tewas', *Acehkita.com*, 23 February 2010 (accessed 14 March 2010).

February, on the threshold of an eruption of violence, the chief of the Aceh police force declared, 'We are still investigating who they are, where they come from, and why they have come here.'³¹ The worst confrontation, on 4 March in a forest near the village of Lamkabeu, resulted in the deaths of three police, 11 wounded, and another civilian casualty (a farmer from Lamkabeu).³² In subsequent weeks local media covered the chase obsessively. However, it still took several months before a detailed picture was formed of the composition of the group, its ideological pedigree, and the central role of the infamous Dulmatin.

During the clash at Lamkabeu, people in the surrounding area were requested not to leave their villages after dark. This also applied to the villagers of Jurong. A small, rural community with about 500 inhabitants, Jurong is located in the elongated strip of irrigated land between the Jantho mountains and Seulawah. The discovery of the 'terrorist camp' caused a disruption of daily routines. Police patrolled the area regularly.³³ Roads and rice fields were closed off, calling to mind the time of the conflict.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, one of the primary reactions among villagers was one of fear. Saiful, a 66-year-old man who used to be a trader in the nearby market, said:

People are scared. Scared that the conflict will flare up again. Is it really a terrorist network (*jaringan teroris*), like they say in the newspaper? ... We have not seen this before in Aceh. Or are they linked to GAM, as some other people say? If this is true, then we're finished (*habis semua*).

Another reaction, which also placed the situation in the framework of the conflict, was anger. Suraiya, a 28-year-old mother of one, expressed a common feeling when I talked to her on 4 March, the day after the clash at Lamkabeu:

31 'Segera identifikasi tersangka teroris', *Serambi Indonesia*, 25 February 2010.

32 International Crisis Group, 'Indonesia: Jihadi surprise in Aceh', 12.

33 During my fieldwork I travelled back and forth between Jurong and my other field site, a neighbourhood in Banda Aceh, where I rented a house. In Jurong I lived with a host family. During the shooting in Lamkabeu, neither the villagers nor the local authorities thought my presence to be particularly problematic. However I was requested to report daily to the nearby police office, which I did for a few days until the shootings stopped.

34 During the conflict Jurong was a relatively safe place. Due to its location – close to the main road, the local police station and a well-known religious boarding school – the village was spared much of the violence inflicted on more isolated parts of Aceh Besar, including the mountainous areas around Lamteuba and Lamkabeu, both of which were known as GAM hotspots.

Like always, ordinary people are caught in between (*masyarakat di antaranya*). Innocent villagers are being killed again. This is what the police usually do: first they shoot; then they investigate (*nggak ada pembicaraan langsung ditembak*).

The fact that it was harvest-time made the situation extra dangerous, Suraiya explained. 'People go to the rice fields. They may not know about the curfew (*jam malam*). No one knows exactly what is going on.' My host mother, Adhinda, worried about her (adult) son, who regularly drove to the market of Lamteuba to deliver goods or people with his pickup truck. 'Here in the village it is safe,' she said, 'it would be better if he didn't go there.'

One might expect this violence, and especially the shooting of an ordinary villager, to be the talk of the day. However, when I asked Djuned, who worked as a tailor at the market, what news was going around, he told me that few people were talking about it in public. Asked why, he said, 'You never know who is listening. We do not know more than what we read in the newspaper. But there might be malevolent people around (*ada yang jahat, ada yang tidak*).' Further explanation was unnecessary. People worried about the presence of intelligence agents – and the possibility of raising suspicion – and thus kept quiet. This association became more tangible for me in a discussion with Rina, a middle-aged woman who, together with her husband, ran the village coffee shop. The day before I talked to her, she explained, a couple of strangers had stopped at the coffee shop. They had asked her whether she had seen anything suspicious, after which she told them that she 'did not know anything' (A: *hana teupeu*). This phrase alone – when used in this situation – symbolised the fear and distrust of security forces during the years of conflict.

In private conversations, emotional reactions were accompanied by more analytical ones. When I visited Safwan (quoted already in the introduction), he and his family were watching the national news channel Metro TV, which featured brief coverage from Aceh, including footage of ambulances with wounded police arriving at the main hospital in Banda Aceh. They were hoping for more information, and at the same time curious to see how these events taking place nearby were presented to a national public. The news crawler at the bottom of the screen contained messages such as '4 terrorists, 1 Brimob member dead' and 'SBY: terrorists are not GAM'. It also featured a brief statement by the governor of Aceh, Irwandi Yusuf, who declared that, despite the 'hunt for the terrorists' (*operasi pemburuan teroris*), Aceh was 'a hundred percent safe'. In the meantime, Safwan was giving his opinion:

- Safwan: You see, they [the 'terrorists'] are all from outside. They come from Java. Terrorism is a problem there, not here.
- David: But haven't they said on the news that some in this group are Acehnese?
- s: Yes, but they are not the ones recruiting (*yang mengerahkan* [i.e. the leaders of the cell]).
- D: Do you think Aceh is a fruitful place for an organisation like JI to recruit?
- s: Absolutely. There are many poor people around here, I mean young people without much education. These people are easily lured (*mudah dipancing*) when they are given money and weapons (*dikasih uang ... senjata*).
- D: So what about the religious aspect (*bagaimana faktor agama*), you know, the goals of JI?
- s: [Thinks for a while] Yes, perhaps religion is important too. Aceh is Islamic. ... But this is not the main thing. People who have gone to school, who have a job, they are not interested (*nggak tertarik*).

Talking to various people over the next few days, I found this sentiment to be fairly common. Not everyone thought about it in exactly the same way, though. Take, for example, Hafid, a 25-year-old young man who sold vegetables at the market. Before the tsunami, Hafid had spent a few years studying in a *pesantren* on the west coast. At first he downplayed the situation, arguing that the group was small and could never disrupt peace. Just like Safwan, he mentioned the temptation of money and adventure: but then he brought up something that was completely absent from Safwan's speculations. One might agree with their methods or not, he said, but the 'terrorists' were still 'defenders of Islam' (*pembela Islam*). Although he did not have much formal education, Hafid was very interested in international politics. Equally important, he was well aware of the dominant sentiments among students of the *pesantren*.

Just go there, to the *pesantren*, and check what the students are talking about. What they are reading. They worry about the situation in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan. Look at what the Americans are doing. Some people are afraid that they [i.e. 'the Americans'] will come here, and do the same as in Iraq. Are you still surprised, then, that this is happening?

Hafid's argument was not that the *pesantren* formed a dangerous pool of potential jihadis. Rather, he wanted to convey that – contrary to the often heard idea that the Acehnese are not susceptible to ideas

coming from 'outside' – quite a lot of sympathy existed, especially among younger people, for the idea of 'global jihad' and the struggle against 'Western imperialism'. These thoughts and images circulated freely in Aceh and, even though most ulama in Aceh forcefully reject the kind of violent radicalism associated with JI and kindred groups, the (relatively introverted) world of the *pesantren* is not exempt from this.

These reactions seem to fit rather well with the conflicting narratives I described in the introduction, of Acehnese nationalism and transnational Muslim solidarity. Other views complicated this dichotomy however. Djuned (quoted above) initially advanced an argument that was similar to that of Safwan:

There is no reason for terrorism here. Everyone in Aceh is Muslim. We are all Shafi'i. We respect people from other religions. Non-Muslim people, like the Chinese, also live in Aceh, as long as they respect the Acehnese (*hormati orang Aceh* [i.e. Muslims]). In Jakarta you can find other madhhab [schools of law, i.e. other than Shafi'i]. But in Aceh it is not allowed to harass other people (*tak boleh mengganggu orang*).³⁵

Like Hafid, Djuned dismissed the jihadis as a 'small group', and predicted that the unrest would soon be over. Having said that, however, he continued with an interesting afterthought, drawing attention to regional differences within Aceh:

Don't forget that this is Aceh Besar. During the conflict, Aceh Besar was calm. In Pidie and North Aceh, it is different. It is always disorder there (*selalu kacau*). ... People from Pidie are hot-headed (*darah panas*). They are traders, looking for money (*pedagang, mencari uang*).

People from West Aceh could also be dangerous, he continued, albeit for a different reason: '[i]n West Aceh, many people know black magic (*ilmu hitam*), but in Aceh Besar, people are just normal (*orang biasa saja*)'. The terrorists, in other words, had definitely come to the wrong place.

The ideas that North Aceh is a place of 'disorder' (*kacau*) and that West Aceh is a remote, mysterious place abounding in witchcraft and associated dangers (*ilmu gaib*) are important registers in Aceh. They have roots going back to the pre-modern period, and were strengthened

35 In Southeast Asia, the Shafi'i madhhab is the generally accepted school of law among Sunni Muslims. In his statement, Djuned referred to the fact that often the Shafi'i madhhab is regarded as less conservative and therefore more inclusive, when compared to other schools of law, including the Hanafi and Hanbali.

during the colonial period and subsequent conflicts.³⁶ These 'internal' stereotypes were addressed in different ways. Although the confrontation at Lamkabeu took place fairly deep in the forest, it was clear that the situation had escalated. Shots were heard within a wide radius, while dead and wounded police officers, rather than 'terrorists', were being evacuated from the forest and carried off to Banda Aceh over the main road for all to see.³⁷ When I talked to Udin (20), sitting in the village coffee shop, he said:

These are Mujahedeen. They have come here to practice, you know, to go to Pakistan, or Iraq. They are not a disturbance. So why should they be arrested? [Lowers his voice] You know, all of these ambulances we hear, they are carrying Brimob, not Mujahedeen. Have you wondered why? Why it is just dead and wounded Brimob who are carried out of the forest, even though they went in six against one? These fighters are *alim* [knowledgeable]. They have special knowledge (*ilmu*). Some of them have the knowledge to become invisible (*ilmu gaib*), or invulnerable (*ilmu kebal*).

Thus in a single statement, Udin connected the confrontation to the global jihad and to local traditions of mysticism and pious resistance.³⁸

A certain respect for the jihadis' struggle was noticeable, especially among young men. Often it was not (or not only) driven by religious or ideological persuasion, but rather by a more general masculine fascination with guerilla warfare and renegade behaviour. Referring to the size of the security operation and the many rumours going around, Udin stated that the terrorists, being heavily outnumbered by the police, had to be sparing (*hemat*) with their bullets and use them in a smart way. One of his friends, Ramli, later told me that the terrorists were much better trained than many people thought. 'They are professionals (*profèssional*)', he claimed, 'elite (*elit*)'.

The emotions and explanations referred to in this section, for a large part, were based on rumours. However it is not my intention to engage in a factual reconstruction of events. Instead, I would like to suggest that my conversations with the residents of Jurong may serve

36 For an elaboration of this argument see Kloos, *Becoming better Muslims*.

37 '10 Polisi Tertembak di Lamkabeu', *Acehkita.org*, 5 March 2010.

38 When I asked Mustafa, an older man who was also sitting in the coffee shop and listening to my conversation with Udin, whether he knew people in the village who commanded such powers, he said, 'No, but in the past, yes, during the period of the Darul Islam (*masa DI/TII*)'.

as a kind of prism, revealing some of the options my interlocutors had at their disposal as they were trying to make sense of the situation. These options were based on local differences, connected to gender, social background and age. They elaborated or combined diverse images – of Acehnese self-awareness and the struggle for independence, of clandestine operations and internalised suspicion, of global jihad, mystical powers and regional identity – and alluded to various ways in which these images were woven into local memory and experience and through which they became meaningful or tangible. Many people were fearful of the conflict resurfacing, but probing deeper into individual stances and concerns, these responses and speculations complicated the seemingly straightforward representation of the situation as advanced by most of the media reports and investigations quoted in the introduction. They draw attention to the ambiguity of local interpretation, as well as its changing nature.

In the next section I explore further the origins and evolution of these discursive formations. Taken together, they constitute a rich and diverse repertoire of ideas, images and collective memories. Focusing on the popular discourse of ‘holy struggle’, I will try to show how these images of violence and piety have travelled through time and space, affecting different people in different ways.

4 From Indra Patra to ‘Crazy Aceh’: A Brief Genealogy of Struggle

Indra Patra is a coastal fortification located some 20 kilometres north east of Banda Aceh. The structure is one of the few tangible reminders of the 16th century naval battles fought by the Sultanate of Aceh against Portuguese competitors in the region. In the course of the 16th and early 17th centuries, Acehnese and Portuguese war fleets clashed several times. While political and economic motives informed these events, both sides framed the conflict, at least partly, in religious language.³⁹

39 See Amirul Hadi, *Islam and state in Sumatra: A study of seventeenth-century Aceh* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Peter Borschberg, *The Singapore and Melaka Straits: Violence, security and diplomacy in the 17th century* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2010); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Pulverized in Aceh: On Luís Monteiro and his “martyrdom”’, *Archipel* 78 (2009), 19–60. The rise of Acehnese power and the arrival of the Portuguese in the Straits of Melaka were connected developments. When the Portuguese conquered Melaka, Muslim traders in the region rerouted their ships to the north coast of Sumatra. This redirection of trade strengthened these ports,

In 1566, the Sultan of Aceh, Ala'ud-din al-Kahar, sent an envoy to the Ottoman Caliph, Suleiman the Magnificent, requesting him to 'come to the aid of Muslim pilgrims and merchants being attacked by the "infidel" (*kafir*) Portuguese'.⁴⁰ A year later, Turkish arms were sent to Aceh by Suleiman's successor, Selim II, and, in turn, became legendary objects in the Acehnese literature of the 17th century.

When the Dutch invaded Aceh in 1873, as part of an attempt to enlarge their colonial empire and gain full control over the Straits of Melaka, the image of *kafir* aggression was revived. The leaders of Acehnese resistance – local aristocrats, such as Panglima Polem, Teuku Umar, Cut Nyak Dhien, and Cut Nyak Meutia, as well as local ulama, such as Teungku di Tiro and Teungku Kutakarang – presented the struggle as a Holy War. When Sultan Muhamad Daud Syah surrendered in 1903, the war continued, and it was not before the late 1910s that the main centres of resistance were crushed. An important symbol of the war against the Dutch was an Acehnese language poem called *Hikayat Prang Kompeuni* ('Story of the War against the Dutch') or *Hikayat Prang Sabil* ('Story of the Holy War'). Although many different versions of this poem circulated, a central message in all of them was that individual Muslims had a duty to take part in the struggle. Those who died, it stated, would die as martyrs and go to Heaven.⁴¹

For Acehnese resistance fighters, the *Hikayat Prang Sabil* must have been a source of inspiration and protection, with a function similar to that of the amulets they wore around their necks or the flags with Qur'anic verses and other sacred artifacts they carried with them through the forest. For the majority of Acehnese however, the text might have meant something different. In the *Hikayat Prang Sabil*, the struggle against the Dutch referred not just to the use of violence, but also at the same time to a struggle of the soul, part of a personal, spiritual development, and as a way of strengthening oneself against the 'tricks of the devil'. The poem,

including Aceh, and offered incentives for a stronger attachment to Islam: see Michael F. Laffan, *The makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the narration of a Sufi past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 10; Om Prakash, 'The trading world of India and Southeast Asia in the early modern period', *Archipel* 56 (1998), 31–42:34.

40 Anthony Reid, 'Aceh and the Turkish connection', in Arndt Graf, Susanne Schröter and Edwin Wieringa (eds.), *Aceh: History, politics and culture* (Singapore: ISEAS Press, 2010), 26–38:29–30.

41 Different versions can be found in T. Ibrahim Alfian, *Sastra Perang: Sebuah pembicaraan mengenai Hikayat Perang Sabil* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1992) and Henri T. Damsté, 'Hikajat Prang Sabil', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië* 84, 1 (1928), 545–607.

in other words, was an instrument of moral self-fashioning, part of a crucial (and in a sense very 'modern') literary development which may be traced at least to the mid-18th century.⁴² This multilayered aspect was lost to the ears of Dutch generals. For them, the poem was simply a dangerous piece of propaganda. Soldiers of the colonial army were ordered to search villages and houses for copies of the text. Most of these were destroyed, while some were collected for study.⁴³

In the final decades of Dutch colonial rule Acehnese images of holy war and Dutch ideas about Acehnese fanaticism evolved further. In July 1933, a Dutch military officer called Captain Schmid was murdered in the town of Lho' Sukon, North Aceh. The perpetrator was an ordinary Acehnese villager, who was also killed in the attack. The murder was widely covered in the Dutch press and became the archetypical example of a phenomenon known, across the Netherlands Indies, as 'Aceh murders' (D: *Atjeh-moorden*). The Dutch used this term to denote a particular kind of suicide attack directed at the lives of Europeans. These attacks were committed by Acehnese individuals (both men and women) who lived on the margins of society. Poor, outcasts or suffering from an incurable disease, they had lost any hope for their future and decided to become martyrs in the name of their faith. Dutch administrators saw the *Atjeh-moorden* as something related to, but also distinct from, the 'holy war'. In their eyes, the war in Aceh had come to an end in the late 1910s, which meant that individual attacks on Europeans would no longer be categorised as 'acts of war'. Frustrated that the attacks continued to occur, even though political and economic stability was clearly improving, they accentuated the more primordial traits of the Acehnese 'race', including religious fanaticism, conservatism, rebelliousness and, ultimately, an inclination to craziness. In 1923, the largest mental asylum of the Dutch East Indies was built in Aceh, with the specific purpose of dealing with the problem of the *Atjeh-moorden*.⁴⁴

The image of holy war acquired new meanings in the independence era. In 1945, a group of Acehnese religious leaders issued a declaration which treated the Indonesian Revolution as jihad.⁴⁵ In the 1950s however, the Darul Islam under the leadership of Daud Beureueh used the same slogan to rebel *against* the Republican government. The idea of jihad was

42 For an elaboration of this argument see Kloos, *Becoming better Muslims*.

43 Damsté, 'Hikajat Prang Sabi'.

44 See David Kloos, 'A crazy state: Violence, psychiatry and colonialism in Aceh, Indonesia, ca. 1910–1942', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 170, 1 (2014), 25–65.

45 Reid, *The blood of the people*, 190.

'reawakened ... when Acehese ulama called for a violent struggle with the slogan "martyrdom or victory" and denigrated their opponents as kafir and apostates'.⁴⁶ At the same time, the Indonesian military issued a handbook in which they warned soldiers serving in the province of the 'bad influence' of the *Hikayat Prang Sabil*. As noted, the Darul Islam formed the germ of the next conflict between the Indonesian military and the Acehese separatist movement GAM. The ideology of GAM was ethno-nationalist rather than Islamist. It fought for Acehese independence, not for an Islamic state. Yet the founder and leader, Hasan di Tiro – a grandson of Teungku Cik di Tiro, one of the great leaders of the Aceh war – was quick to conjure up the image of the holy war. Thus, Aspinall writes about an Acehese 'cult of martyrdom' marking the early period of GAM.⁴⁷ The insurgence was reminiscent of the holy war in other ways too. Some GAM commanders became legendary figures, among both their own followers and their adversaries, not just because of their leading role in the resistance, but also because of the magical powers – including the power to become invisible or invulnerable – they were believed to possess.

GAM was not the only party to lay a claim to the heritage of the holy war. In Aceh, the emergence of General Suharto's New Order regime – and the violent crackdown on (alleged) communists – was accompanied by an attempt to tie the 'rebellious' class of ulama more closely to the state.⁴⁸ In December 1965, the army created the Council of Ulama of the Special Province of Aceh (Majelis Ulama Propinsi Daerah Istimewa Aceh; the predecessor of the national Majelis Ulama Indonesia [MUI], or Indonesian Council of Ulama). In its first *fatwa*, the Council 'banned' communist sympathies, conflating communism with atheism and neo-colonial ideology.⁴⁹ This decision was further solidified in terms of a vow (*ikrar*) to continue the 'holy struggle' (*perjuangan yang suci*)

46 Aspinall, *Islam and nation*, 96–97.

47 Ibid., 97–99.

48 These two developments were connected. Throughout Indonesia, the mass killings of suspected members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) were carried out in part by affiliates of Islamic organisations. In Aceh, thousands were killed in actions spearheaded by Islamic youth groups sympathetic to the Darul Islam, who were 'openly encouraged by the army commander in Aceh': Morris, 'Islam and politics in Aceh', 246.

49 'Musyawarah Alim Ulama se Daerah Istimewa Aceh yang berlangsung dari tanggal 17 s/d 18 Desember 1965', 18 December 1965. *Kumpulan fatwa-fatwa Majelis Ulama Propinsi Daerah Istimewa Aceh tahun 1965 s/d 31 Maret 1970* (Banda Aceh: Sekretariat Majelis Ulama Propinsi Daerah Istimewa Aceh, 1979).

that was the Indonesian Revolution.⁵⁰ In the 1970s and 1980s the Ulama Council – as well as other institutions of state Islam, such as the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Ar-Raniry in Banda Aceh – was instrumental in the process of aligning Acehnese ulama with the central ideological principles of the New Order by moulding Islamic norms and practices (and their scriptural justification) into the straightjacket of security, economic growth and ‘development’.⁵¹ In 1985 former chairman of the council and former governor of Aceh, Ali Hasjmy, in a reflection on his career, claimed that ‘the people of Aceh agreed and believed that Darussalam [i.e. ‘Aceh’] and the Majelis Ulama could not be separated in the midst of the struggle’. This, he stated, is why the army had reinvigorated the ulama in the ‘broad meaning of Darussalam, which is to produce people of [the state ideology] *pancasila*, of God’s infinite greatness, of superior spirit, of extensive learning, and a noble mind’.⁵²

The idea of holy struggle thus acquired different meanings in the hands of different people. While Hasan di Tiro was putting effort into harmonising the concept with Acehnese nationalism, Ali Hasjmy solidly embedded it in secular state ideology. Beyond the polarised sphere of political ideology, moreover, hybrid forms emerged. Let me conclude this section with three examples which show that the images of violence and piety discussed here are dynamic constructs, open to interpretation and continuous adaptation depending on the context.

Tjoet Nja’ Dhien (1988) is one of the most successful Indonesian motion pictures of the 20th century, and deals with an illustrious episode in the Aceh War.⁵³ The film shows how Cut Nyak Dhien called her fellow Acehnese to arms, in order to protect their land (A: *nanggroe*) and their faith (*keyakinan*) against the ‘unbelievers’ (*kaphe-kaphe*), to educate their children by reading the *Hikayat Perang Sabil*, and to follow them in martyrdom (*menjadi syahid*) by joining the jihad. While romanticising the holy struggle of the Acehnese, the film portrayed the war as part of the Indonesian national struggle. As the actress Christine Hakim, famous for her role as Cut Nyak Dhien (*Tjoet Nja’ Dhien*), put it:

Before I played *Tjoet Nja’ Dhien* I was always confused as to where my blood came from, because I could not directly answer the question,

50 M. Ali Hasjmy, *Semangat merdeka: 70 tahun menempuh jalan pergolakan & perjuangan kemerdekaan* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1985), 706.

51 For an elaborated discussion of this process see Feener, *Shari’a and social engineering*.

52 Hasjmy, *Semangat merdeka*, 711.

53 *Tjoet Nja’ Dhien* (Indonesia, Eros Djarot, 1989).

'Where do you come from?' I have mixed blood. I grew up in Yogyakarta, Central Java, but my parents, grandparents and great grandparents are from Padang, Aceh, Banten, Pekalongan, Madiun, and the Middle East. I wanted to know more. When you know your roots you know exactly who you are and where you belong. ... We Indonesians must respect Tjoet Nja Dhien and other heroes too, who fought to make us free.⁵⁴

Another example is the afterlife of the *Hikayat Perang Sabil*. In 1999, the poem was rediscovered by a young class of urbanites, who were involved not in the armed struggle of GAM, but in grand-scale, peaceful demonstrations calling for a referendum on the administrative status of Aceh.⁵⁵ The poem was recited during rallies, 'with singers often moving protestors to tears with the beauty of its rhythms and the power of its lyrics.'⁵⁶ According to Aspinall, the sudden popularity of the poem may be explained, at least in part, on the basis of the 'clandestine contact' between urban activists and GAM. At the same time, it is important to note that the epic acquired new meanings in the context of the call for a referendum. Although many of them had never heard the poem before, they were struck by its mobilising qualities, its ability to 'stimulate a spirit of Acehnese and a spirit of resistance'. This, writes Aspinall, was a 'cultural nationalism still in formation'.

Finally, let me mention the work of Taufik Al-Mubarak, a young journalist, writer and former referendum activist, and his decision to use the phrase *Aceh Pungo* ('crazy Aceh') as the title of a collection of his newspaper columns.⁵⁷ This title was meant as a provocation, he explained, displaying the fundamental ambivalence this term acquired after the Dutch began to think of the Acehnese as being 'inclined' to lunacy. Pungo ('crazy'), as I noticed myself during my fieldwork, is both a sensitive and an ambiguous term. In Aceh, to call someone pungo may be the quickest way to get into a fight. At the same time, the term has come to refer to a range of heroic, unique, magical or indeed any other kind of extraordinary behaviour. In his foreword to the volume, the editor wrote that Cut Nyak Dhien was also pungo, as was the author, Taufik Al Mubarak. In the piece entitled 'Pungo', Taufik discusses, in a confrontational style, the ironies of his time:

54 Cynthia Webb, 'Christine Hakim: Going where life leads her', www.thejakartapost.com, 8 December 2010 (accessed 4 November 2013).

55 Edward Aspinall, 'Whither Aceh', *Inside Indonesia* 62, April–June 2000.

56 Aspinall, *Islam and nation*, 139.

57 Taufik Al-Mubarak, *Aceh Pungo* (Banda Aceh: Bandar Publishing, 2009).

When, like now, it is the season of tenders, I see many Acehnese – though not just Acehnese – who are suddenly crazy (*tergila-gila*) because they want to buy a deluxe car of the *Harrier* brand. This desire is stronger than the year before, when they just wanted to own a Honda CRV or New CRV. Such people are commonly referred to by villagers as ‘*Pungo Moto*’ [crazy for cars].

This type of desire reminds me of the early days of *reformasi* in Aceh. During that period the Acehnese just asked for the human rights violators to be brought to trial, but this was ignored by the central government. Then the Acehnese raised their demands, requesting the Federal government that Aceh would be given a share of 70 per cent of the financial balance, leaving 30 per cent for the centre [i.e. ‘Jakarta’]. This request was also ignored, so Aceh asked for a Referendum. This demand was not met either. Because they were angry, the Acehnese simultaneously demanded Independence.

This shows us that the Acehnese are very *Pungo* in their demands, and that they always try to raise the offer. For the Acehnese, this is a matter of pride. But evidently, Indonesia can be more *pungo* still. The Acehnese asked for independence, and they got a military emergency instead. *Biet-biet pungo* [crazy indeed].⁵⁸

The challenge that Aceh is facing, Taufik seems to imply, goes beyond the struggle against ‘outsiders’. It involves a critical perspective on contemporary society, formulated wholly from within Aceh, emphasising, one might say, not only the struggle against others, but also the struggle against oneself.

5 Conclusion

At first sight there seems to be little common ground between the Acehnese history of resistance against state power and the sudden appearance in February 2010 of the forces of global jihad. The members of the jihadi cell led by the ‘famous’ terrorist Dulmatin were not particularly interested in the Acehnese cause. Although they had hoped for more sympathy among the notoriously pious Acehnese, as becomes clear from their failed attempts to gain support from Acehnese religious leaders,

58 Taufik Al-Mubarak, ‘Pungo’, in *Aceh Pungo*, 173–174, 174. Originally printed in *Harian Aceh*, 17 June 2008. N.B.: ‘Season of tenders’ refers to the yearly period during which government projects are put out to tender, after the approval of the state budget.

geography (suitable terrain for clandestine operations) seems to have been a more important factor in their choice of location. At the same time, people in Aceh generally seemed to regard their presence as an outright threat to a hard-won peace. That said, this strange and unexpected episode in my fieldwork also revealed a lot about the ways in which 'Aceh' has been constructed, both inside and outside the province, as a meaningful entity. Like all geographic denominations, 'Aceh' means more than a physical space defined by borders. It exists in the minds of people as a set of particular features and images, connected to the shared and contested memories of the past and views of, and aspirations for, the future. My research in Aceh, which deals, among other topics, with the religious practices and experiences of ordinary Acehnese, has involved a careful deconstruction of the detrimental stereotypes dominating many (scholarly as well as non-scholarly) views of Acehnese history and society. The problem remains, however, that images of violence and piety carry meaning for the people I write about. The stereotype of Acehnese fanaticism is a distortion, but it is also, to some extent at least, quite tangible and 'real'.

This situation, obviously, produces particular challenges for a researcher. On the one hand, these concern the complex ways in which stereotypes created outside Aceh travel 'back', so to speak, from the transnational spaces in which they are produced into the lives of ordinary Acehnese. On the other hand, the discussion above shows that images of violence and piety have been produced continuously within Aceh, by different groups and individuals, and under differing circumstances. One thing I have tried to make clear, then, is the usefulness of combining historical research with the practice of doing fieldwork, approaching this as a truly dialectical enterprise. Fieldwork as a method is indispensable for questioning the images constructed in archives, libraries and collective memory, while archival and library research helps us to understand the discourses and social practices we encounter in the field. By going back and forth, we may appreciate the force of (stereotypical) images, as well as the limits to their effects.

Another, more specific argument concerns the ways in which the images of violence and piety – that is, the various expressions of 'holy struggle' delineated above – are 'used', and how this is commonly interpreted. By now it has become commonplace to frame the history of Aceh in terms of an ongoing struggle against 'outside' forces, be this Dutch colonialism, the Indonesian central state or the fears of 'Westernisation' or 'Christianisation' emerging in the slipstream of post-tsunami reconstruction and post-2005 peace building processes. This has led, to some extent, to misrecognition of the function of local

stereotypes. Ethnic stereotypes provide the kind of 'common ground' on the basis of which differences between groups are mutually recognised and talked about.⁵⁹ Thus, Javanese may talk about 'fanatical' Acehnese in order to emphasise their own moderate or 'civilized' outlook, while Acehnese may talk about 'Javanese religion' in order to reinforce their own religious practices as being 'properly Islamic'. Although both statements are based on a claim of moral superiority, what is agreed upon is that the Acehnese are particularly 'pious'. However – and this is the point I want to emphasise – stereotypes also return, and are sometimes even explicitly directed (albeit perhaps in a different form) to those who produced them in the first place. Let me make this clearer by returning briefly to some of the images of violence and piety discussed in the preceding sections.

Representations of Aceh, whether in academic writing, media sources, the bulletins, leaflets, and research publications of (local and international) civil society organisations, or – indeed – in statements made by the Acehnese themselves, often treat Acehnese resistance to outside influences as a basic premise, that is, as a point of departure rather than a historical construction itself. The image of 'holy war', rooted in old images of aggressive 'unbelievers' (starting with the Portuguese), was reproduced and connected to an evolving discourse of Acehnese ethnic self-awareness through resistance to Dutch colonialism and the abuses of the Indonesian central state. The Aceh 'conflict' and the experience of decades of violence and grief framed many reactions to the unexpected outburst of violence in early 2010. My interlocutors in Jurong were confronted with media reports about the death of innocent civilians, with the closing of roads and rice fields, and with a stream of credible and incredible rumours. Some of my interlocutors worried about the 'return' of the conflict. Others tried to close the discussion in advance by stating that, obviously, this was not 'their' struggle. To some extent, these reactions may be seen as a standard response, based on a one-sided account of Acehnese history. Of course, the framework of the Aceh conflict refers to a history and a violence that are both real and deeply disturbing. It is also however, a way of simplifying, defusing, neutralising or rendering irrelevant alternative discourses, as well as a range of 'internal' conflicts and tensions. Both 'Acehnese' and 'outsiders' have stakes, in particular situations and time frames, in downplaying such internal contestations, thereby strengthening the stereotypes associated with Acehnese ethnic identity.

59 See e.g. Thomas H. Eriksen, *Common denominators: Ethnicity, nation-building and compromise in Mauritius* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 48–56.

Not all reactions in Jurong were framed in conflict-derived terms. The historical and ethnographic discussion presented above conveys other images that were used to interpret, explain or categorise both the cause and effect of violent confrontation. While these images may figure less at the forefront of the dominant narrative of Acehese history, they are not, for that reason, necessarily less resonant, powerful or 'available'. Some of my interlocutors in Jurong, in their attempt to understand or speculate about what was going on, drew on a long, multifaceted tradition of Islamic mysticism, expressed in the dynamic use and meaning of a text like the *Hikayat Perang Sabil*, or the belief in supernatural powers. This complicates the framework of the Aceh conflict in at least one respect, as the latter tends to oppose an ongoing Acehese tradition of pious resistance against the (equally static) interests of ('syncretist' or 'pseudo-Muslim') Javanese oppressors. In Jurong, the sources of magical power and mysticism were often sought, geographically, in the west coast districts and (sometimes) the central highlands, distinguishing these areas from the 'heartland' of the Darul Islam and the GAM (the north coast and Pidie), as well as Aceh Besar itself. Such distinctions in turn, were connected to the shifting dichotomies between 'urban' and 'rural' settings, between 'modern' and 'traditional' lifestyles, and to personal differences in social background and class. Similar mechanisms inform the ways in which official images of Aceh have been constructed. One of the reasons why Ali Hasjmy was able to convert the Aceh-centric image of holy war into a more neutral image of 'holy struggle' was his social position as a reform-minded ulama, former Darul Islam leader and administrator, his role in formulating and representing an urban strand of Islamic modernism, and his personal experience with political life in Jakarta. Few others were able to mediate so successfully between the discourse of Acehese exceptionalism and the New Order language of statist developmentalism.

A final suggestion concerns the relationship between stereotyping and the problematic idea of 'pious resistance' itself. First, it is important not to overstate the 'religious' factor, even in instances where this might seem apparent. Some of Jurong's young men expressed their respect for the jihadis' struggle, not so much out of cause, but out of a more general sense of sympathy for their relatively weak position (and thus their bravery and the need to be 'smart'), combined with an interest in the adventurous side of armed combat; but if the image of pious resistance loses its hold here, in other contexts Acehese stereotypes take centre stage, albeit perhaps in unexpected ways. As Taufik Al Mubarak and his reference to the phrase 'Crazy Aceh' show, stereotypes are not always used to sharpen mutual differences. They also have the ability to

serve as the basis or conceptual footing for internal cultural critique. Images of violence and piety are powerful signifiers when it comes to stating the substance of Acehnese ethnic identity, yet they are also highly contested within Acehnese society, and in order to understand their effects it is crucial to ask how they are employed, by whom, and why. In some situations they may indeed be used to magnify the difference from 'others'. In other situations they may lead to reflection, and raise or strengthen ideas for cultural change.