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Convergence of Colonial Politics, Islamic Ideology, and Popular Resistance: An Analysis of the Background of the Aceh War (1873-1903)

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ABSTRACT

The Aceh War (1873-1903) was one of the most critical and protracted armed conflicts in the history of Dutch colonialism in the Indonesian archipelago. This article aims to examine the background of the Aceh War through a thematic approach to three key aspects: colonial political expansion, the influence of Islamic ideology, and community participation, as manifested in the "People's War" (*Perang Semesta).* The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in a review of secondary sources, including historical books, academic papers, and digital archives. The findings show that the conflict was fueled not just by Dutch colonial ambition following the 1871 Sumatra Treaty, but also by *jihad* discourse bolstered through religious writing like The *Hikayat Perang Sabil* and collective social opposition. This research highlights the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in understanding local resistance as a multifaceted manifestation of political, cultural, and spiritual conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

The Aceh War (1873-1903) was one of the most protracted and most significant conflicts in Indonesia's history of resistance to colonialism. Unlike other local conflicts in the archipelago, which tended to be limited in scope and duration, the Aceh War represented a prolonged struggle with a broad social reach and strong ideological motivation. Over more than three decades, the conflict claimed tens of thousands of lives on both sides, disrupted local socio-political structures, and carved out a crucial chapter in the history of colonialism and early Indonesian nationalism (Hadi, 2003; Harun, 1982; Missbach, 2010).

Aceh's resistance was proactive and sustained, unlike the largely reactive resistance movements in many other parts of the Dutch East Indies. The conflict cannot be separated from the role of the Aceh Sultanate as a political entity that had demonstrated autonomy and regional influence since the sixteenth century. Even before the Dutch invasion, Aceh maintained diplomatic and trade relations with foreign powers, including the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France, and Italy (Alfian, 1987). At the western tip of the archipelago, right at the mouth of the Strait of Malacca, one of the busiest maritime trade routes in the world-Aceh occupied a highly strategic position in the geopolitical calculations of colonial powers (Azra & Hasan, 2002).

The formal trigger of the Aceh War was the signing of the 1871 Sumatra Treaty between the British and the Dutch. Politically and diplomatically, this treaty eliminated Aceh's status as a sovereign state and transferred the British's supervisory rights over northern Sumatra to the Dutch (Siahaan et al., 2021). The Dutch then used the treaty as a legal basis to launch a military invasion of the Aceh Sultanate. However, tensions between the Dutch and Aceh had deep roots long before the invasion, marked by Aceh's resistance to various forms of colonial penetration, which were perceived as threats to its customary laws, religion, and political sovereignty (Reid, 2005).

More than merely an armed conflict, the Aceh War was a complex expression of the social, political, cultural, and religious dynamics that responded to Dutch hegemony. A defining characteristic of the resistance by Aceh's people was the powerful influence of Islam. Islam functioned not only as a spiritual framework but also as an ideological foundation for mass mobilisation. The concept of *jihad*, or *perang sabil*, became a highly effective instrument for rallying support from all levels of society. The *Hikayat Perang Sabil* (HPS), also known as *Hikayat Prang Sabi*, is a war

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poem that played a highly influential role in inspiring the Acehnese people's resistance against Dutch colonial rule. It conveys the concept of *jihad* and promises paradise for those who fall in battle as martyrs (*syuhada*) (Abdullah, 2000; Ahmad, 2018).

The HPS was a literary work and an effective medium of religious outreach and ideological mobilisation. In this context, the *ulama* held a central role as spiritual leaders and military organisers. Reid (2004) emphasises that the *ulama* were not only conveyors of divine messages but also revolutionary agents who maintained the morale and discipline of the people. This demonstrates that the Aceh War was fought not only on the battlefield but also in the cultural, discursive, and spiritual spheres.

Recent scholarship on the Aceh War highlights a multidimensional interplay of politics, religion, and society. Earlier analyses focused mainly on colonial diplomacy and military expansion, noting how Dutch intervention and British manoeuvring after the 1871 Sumatra Treaty triggered the conflict (Siahaan et al., 2021; Reid, 2014). In contrast, newer studies emphasize the ideological foundations of resistance, where Islamic teachings and religious texts, such as *HPS,* served as instruments of mobilization and moral legitimation (Ahmad, 2018; Sari et al., 2022). Kloos (2021) and Stolwijk (2021) further reveal that the Acehnese struggle transcended physical warfare, operating as a cultural and symbolic contest sustained through collective memory and faith.

Within this evolving historiography, the Aceh War is increasingly viewed as part of broader pan-Islamic and anti-colonial movements across the Muslim world (Azra & Hasan, 2002; Esposito, 2000). Building on these insights, this study contributes a novel synthesis by integrating colonial political ambition, Islamic ideology, and community mobilisation into a single analytical framework. This approach situates the Aceh War not merely as a regional conflict but as a complex expression of spiritual conviction, political resistance, and social solidarity in the broader context of Southeast Asian colonial history.

However, although existing literature has explained these aspects separately, few studies have sought to integrate them into a single, unified analysis. Most research has focused on one analytical dimension for instance, political and diplomatic studies that highlight Dutch expansionism and British involvement (Reid, 2014; Reid, 2005; Graf, Schroter, & Wieringa, 2010), or religious and ideological analyses that emphasize the role of HPS and the *ulama* in framing jihad narratives (Hasjmy, 1980; Siegel, 1979; Siegel, 2000). However, these works rarely connect such perspectives with the social realities and community structures that sustained resistance at the grassroots level.

Integrating the dimensions of colonial politics, Islamic ideology, and social mobilisation is therefore essential to understanding how Acehnese identity was formed and maintained through prolonged conflict. As Saleh (2005) and Kloos (2021) observe, Acehnese resistance cannot be separated from the intertwining of moral conviction, communal solidarity, and local political order. This synthesis enables a more comprehensive understanding of the Aceh War, not merely as a military encounter, but as a social and cultural movement grounded in enduring values of faith and autonomy.

Furthermore, this resistance must be viewed in the context of nineteenth-century global colonialism. The Aceh War unfolded during the era of "new imperialism," marked by industrial powers competing to control territories in Asia and Africa. Within this framework, the Aceh War became part of the broader narrative of the Muslim world's resistance to Western colonialism, paralleling struggles in Algeria, Sudan, and Libya (Esposito, 2000). These similarities reinforce Aceh's position as an entity representing local interests, broader religious solidarity, and global anti-colonialism.

Building on these considerations, this article seeks to fill a gap in the scholarship by posing a central question: How did the interaction of colonial politics, religious ideology, and community involvement shape the background and dynamics of the Aceh War? By focusing on this thematic integration, the article positions the Aceh War not merely as a historical event within the chronicles of colonialism but as a multidimensional expression of resistance to colonial hegemony, reflecting the cultural resilience, faith, and social solidarity of the Acehnese people.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach through literature-based research to examine the background of the Aceh War. This method is appropriate for addressing the historical and multifaceted nature of the topic, which encompasses social, political, and religious dimensions. Data were collected from credible secondary sources offering diverse perspectives, including classic works (Anthony Reid, C. Snouck Hurgronje, Ibrahim Alfian), peer-reviewed journal articles**,** verified online publications, and government archives. The analysis utilized thematic synthesis within

a critical hermeneutic framework, focusing on three central themes: (1**)** colonial political expansion, (2) Islamic ideology as a driver of jihad, and (3) social participation in warfare. Research validity was strengthened through the use of thematic triangulation and **a** critical evaluation of each source's relevance, authority, and potential bias. The interpretation of power relations and grassroots resistance was guided by postcolonial theory and the sociology of religion, particularly the concepts of *"jihad as cultural resistance"* and *"subaltern agency"* (Moleong, 2017; Tosh, 2015).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dutch Colonial Expansion and Motives

The Dutch decision to intervene militarily in Aceh must be viewed as a result of converging strategic, economic, and political considerations rather than a single, unilateral impulse. Aceh's position at the mouth of the Strait of Malacca made it strategically vital for controlling regional trade routes, and Dutch policy from the 1860s onward increasingly reflected concerns about securing commercial and naval advantage in North Sumatra, a dynamic analyzed in depth by Reid. More than a diplomatic quarrel with Britain, the Sumatra Treaty of 1871 provided a legal and political cover for a Dutch policy shift from coexistence toward direct incorporation, transforming prior patterns of suzerainty and diplomacy into an explicit project of territorial consolidation.

Economic and administrative motives compounded this strategic logic. Dutch actors in the field and in the metropole recognised the potential of parts of Aceh (and adjacent eastern coastal areas) for resource extraction and profitable administration; local studies show that in regions such as East Aceh, the combination of economic promise and weaker social capital made pacification both more attractive and more attainable for colonial authorities. At the same time, archival evidence and parliamentary debates reveal important internal divisions within Dutch politics: ministers such as Fransen van de Putte argued against immediate large-scale military intervention and advocated for alternative, less aggressive policies, a sign that the invasion decision was contested, contingent, and shaped by domestic politics in The Hague as much as by conditions on the ground.

Finally, Dutch anxiety about Aceh's external relations (notably sympathies and possible links with the broader Muslim world) must be seen as an additional causal strand that amplified calls for intervention. Contemporary Dutch correspondence and later analyses suggest that the fear of pan-Islamic support, whether real or imagined, strengthened the argument for a decisive response. However, this ideological fear, combined with concrete geopolitical and economic incentives, prolongs the campaign. For more unmistakable placement evidence: the claim about Dutch unease with Aceh's external ties is better supported by Reid (Reid, 2004, 2005, 2014) and contemporary archival studies, while the local dynamics of East Aceh and debates in The Hague are addressed directly in Ahmad Muhajir's work and studies of Fransen van de Putte's Advocacy for Alternative Colonial Policies in Aceh, 1873-1885 (Muhajir, 2024).

Islam, Jihad, and The Hikayat Perang Sabil

Understanding the Aceh War necessitates a critical examination of the ideological and spiritual narratives that legitimized and sustained the resistance. Applying a critical-hermeneutic approach, this study interprets the concept of *jihad fi sabilillah* not merely as theological rhetoric but as a culturally embedded discourse that transformed Islamic teachings into a socio-political framework of collective action. The analysis reveals that religion in Aceh functioned as both a moral compass and a mobilizing ideology, aligning spiritual duty with anti-colonial struggle (Zainuddin, 1961; Ahmad, 2018).

Thematic triangulation across textual, historical, and sociocultural sources reveals that *Hikayat Perang Sabil* is the most influential medium of ideological transmission. Rather than a simple war poem, it operated as a performative text recited, memorized, and ritualized in public spaces to evoke emotional commitment and moral legitimacy for resistance. According to Ahmad (2018) and the archives of the Ministry of Education and Culture, the *hikayat* was read aloud by *ulama* before battles to instill the idea that dying in war equated to spiritual victory. In his book *Apa Sebab Rakyat Aceh Sanggup Berperang Puluhan Tahun Melawan Agresi Belanda*, Teuku Hasjmy (1980) explains that this text bridged divine command with sociopolitical consciousness, depicting the Dutch not only as invaders of territory but as violators of faith. His analysis underscores the *ulama's* role as both theologians and organizers who maintained morale and coherence as aristocratic authority declined.

A critical evaluation of colonial counter-strategies further supports this interpretation. C. Snouck Hurgronje (1906), in *The Achehnese*, identified Islam as the central obstacle to Dutch control and therefore recommended the

separation of religious from political authority. This colonial hermeneutic sought to fragment Acehnese society through cultural domination, yet it paradoxically confirmed the potency of Islamic ideology in uniting resistance. Viewed through Gramsci's framework of cultural hegemony, this tension illustrates how *Hikayat Perang Sabil* and the *ulama* subverted colonial discourse by converting spiritual obedience into political defiance (Sari et al., 2022).

From the triangulated data, textual analysis, historical interpretation, and sociological observation, it becomes evident that Aceh's *jihad* was not an isolated act of piety but part of a wider transnational network of Islamic learning and anti-colonial movements. As Azra (2002) notes, Southeast Asian scholars maintained connections with Mecca and Cairo, enabling the local adaptation of global *pan-Islamic* ideals. Through this hermeneutic reading, *Hikayat Perang Sabil* emerges as both a theological text and a cultural artefact encoding Acehnese identity, fusing religion, nationalism, and collective memory into a coherent narrative of resistance that endures within oral tradition and social consciousness today.

The Concept of People's War and Popular Participation

Applying a critical-hermeneutic and thematic triangulation approach, the concept of *perang semesta* (total people's war) in Aceh reveals not merely a spontaneous uprising but a structured social process rooted in the interplay between traditional authority, religious ideology, and communal solidarity. Before the rise of *ulama*-led mobilization, the *uleebalang* (*hulubalang*) hereditary chiefs and patrons of local military units played a central role in organizing defense and maintaining political order (Saleh, 2005). These elites controlled local resources and armed followers through systems of loyalty and reciprocity that predated the colonial invasion. As Dutch military pressure increased, *ulama* and *uleebalang* networks gradually merged, producing a hybrid structure of leadership that combined spiritual legitimacy and customary authority (Alfian, 1987; Hasjmy, 1980).

This synthesis transformed Acehnese resistance into a socially integrated movement, which this study identifies as a hermeneutic pattern of adaptation and reorganization. Textual and historical triangulation reveals that *Hikayat Perang Sabil* and similar religious literature did not operate in isolation, but instead circulated through *gampong* networks, connecting moral beliefs to material mobilization. As Siegel (2000) and Alfian (1987) emphasize, this process unfolded through distinct phases: the initial aristocratic defense led by the Uleebalang, the religious consolidation under *ulama* figures such as Teungku Chik di Tiro, and finally the decentralized guerrilla phase sustained by village solidarity and women's participation. Each phase redefined the meaning of resistance, shifting from a defense of sovereignty to the preservation of moral and spiritual order.

From a critical evaluation perspective, the Acehnese concept of *people's war* was fundamentally different from the Western notion of "total war." It was not driven by state bureaucracy but by religious ethics and communal obligations. Hasjmy (1980) interprets this as a *jihad al-sha'bī*, a people's jihad where fighting the invader was both a political and spiritual duty. Ibrahim Alfian (1987) frames it as *perang di jalan Allah* (the holy war), a total moral commitment that integrated the aristocracy, *ulama*, and commoners into one moral community. Siegel (1979) adds that Acehnese warfare was sustained by a cosmological sense of honor and divine justice rather than material calculation, a pattern absent in Java and therefore incompatible with Scott's *moral economy* thesis. In this regard, Popkin's (1979) critique of Scott aligns more closely with Aceh's context, as participation in war was a product of rational religious conviction and communal strategy, not subsistence protest.

Consequently, *perang semesta* in Aceh must be read as a dynamic continuum of leadership, ideology, and social participation. It represents the transformation of traditional patronage into collective agency, guided by faith and communal identity. This hermeneutic reading situates the Aceh War as a historically grounded form of people's resistance in which *uleebalang* patronage, Islamic reformism, and local solidarity converged to construct one of the most enduring anti-colonial movements in Southeast Asia.

As Reid (2005) observes, Aceh's relatively egalitarian and community-based social fabric underpinned its resilience. The absence of a dominant elite and the strength of horizontal cooperation frustrated Dutch *divide et impera* strategies, as bonds based on shared values and religion proved far stronger than administrative ties. Ultimately, Aceh's total war demonstrated that locally rooted nationalism, reinforced by religious conviction and social solidarity, could endure and inspire future generations. The collective memory of the conflict remains central to Acehnese identity today. Stolwijk (2021) notes that the war's stories are still proudly discussed among Aceh's youth, transmitted through oral tradition, public monuments, and family narratives. The Aceh War thus lives on as both a historical event and a symbolic expression of identity and resistance to injustice.

The Synergy of Colonial Politics, Islamic Ideology and Social Mobilisation: Strategic Dynamics and Implications

Applying a critical-hermeneutic and thematic triangulation approach, this study interprets the Aceh War as the outcome of interlocking dynamics between colonial politics, Islamic ideology, and social mobilisation. Rather than treating these as separate variables, this section analyses them sequentially to reveal how each factor interacted in shaping the structure and endurance of resistance.

First, the Dutch colonial drive for expansion cannot be understood merely as a geopolitical ambition to control the Strait of Malacca. As Reid (2005) and Ahmad Muhajir (2018) argue, it also reflected economic motivations linked to the plantation and trade networks of East Sumatra, as well as domestic debates in The Hague about colonial legitimacy and cost. The occupation of Aceh followed the collapse of local patronage after the Sultan's defeat in 1874, which fragmented the *uleebalang* system and created both opportunities and instability within Acehnese society. This period witnessed the weakening of traditional leadership, the rise of opportunistic local elites, and the exploitation of social divisions by Dutch administrators.

Second, the ideological dimension of Islam provided a robust framework that redefined this disintegration into moral resistance. *Jihad fi sabilillah* evolved not only into a theological call but also a social discourse that legitimized the defense of community, honor, and territory. While *Hikayat Perang Sabil* played a key role in disseminating this ideology, it was not the sole factor. The charisma and authority of *ulama* figures such as Teungku Chik di Tiro, Teungku Chik Pante Kulu, and Teungku Muhammad Lamnga mobilized followers through spiritual leadership. Other material and structural factors, such as land confiscation, forced labor, the slave trade, and loss of economic opportunity, fueled the sense of injustice that transformed religious discourse into sustained rebellion (Hasjmy, 1980; Alfian, 1987; Siegel, 1979).

Third, social mobilisation was both reactive and reconstructive. Following the Sultanate's collapse, village-based networks (*gampong*) and kinship solidarities became the nucleus of collective action. This local reorganization enabled the war to persist for decades, even after formal leadership had disintegrated. Through the thematic triangulation of historical and textual evidence, this study finds that *ulama* authority replaced traditional patronage by framing participation as a moral obligation rather than a hierarchical command, thereby transforming dispersed communities into an ethical community of resistance.

A critical evaluation of Snouck Hurgronje's *The Achehnese* (1906) reveals that his analysis was more complex than a mere recommendation to weaken religious authority. Snouck understood Islam as a comprehensive social system, encompassing legal, educational, and moral aspects, that sustained Acehnese autonomy. His proposal to separate religion from politics was part of a broader colonial epistemology that sought to re-engineer indigenous society through selective co-optation. Rather than eliminating religion, his policy aimed to domesticate it under colonial moral order (Hurgronje, 1906). In practice, this produced short-term pacification but long-term sociocultural fragmentation, as the moral consensus binding *Uleebalang* and *ulama* dissolved after 1874.

The social fragmentation relevant to this study, therefore, refers not to the Cumbok War of 1945-46, but to the immediate post-conquest period when the defeat of the Sultan undermined aristocratic cohesion and shattered Aceh's precolonial social hierarchy. This vacuum facilitated the reorganization of leadership around religious figures and local solidarities, forming the sociological foundation of *perang semesta*.

In conclusion, a hermeneutic synthesis of these three dimensions demonstrates that the Aceh War was not simply a clash between colonizer and colony, but a transformative process in which political domination, religious ideology, and social structure continually reshaped one another. Resistance emerged as both a moral and strategic enterprise, a struggle for survival, dignity, and faith within the broader matrix of colonial modernity in Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the origins and persistence of the Aceh War were the result of a dynamic and interdependent relationship between Dutch colonial ambition, Islamic ideological discourse, and Acehnese social mobilisation. Through a critical-hermeneutic analysis and thematic triangulation of political records, religious texts, and social-historical data, the war emerges not as a singular military event but as a long process of cultural and structural negotiation between domination and resistance.

From a political standpoint, Dutch intervention legitimized by the 1871 Sumatra Treaty represented more than a quest for territorial control. It reflected the anxieties of late-nineteenth-century imperialism, economic competition

in the Strait of Malacca, and the collapse of Aceh's precolonial patronage system following the fall of the Sultanate in 1874. These conditions fractured the old *uleebalang* hierarchy and opened new social spaces for religious leadership to mobilize resistance.

The ideological dimension of Islam provided the moral vocabulary through which these structural dislocations were interpreted. *Hikayat Perang Sabil* and related texts were not isolated sources of agitation but part of a broader Islamic intellectual network that translated global currents of *pan-Islamism* into local idioms of jihad and honor. The charisma of the *ulama*, reinforced by communal suffering and the loss of autonomy, transformed religious doctrine into a form of political praxis.

Socially, Aceh's *perang semesta* embodied a moral reconstitution of society under conditions of collapse. When formal governance eroded, *gampong* networks, kinship bonds, and women's participation sustained the resistance and embedded it in everyday life. This synthesis of faith and community transformed the war into a moral order, a struggle for dignity and self-definition rather than mere military survival.

In this light, the Aceh War stands as a comprehensive model of indigenous resistance in Southeast Asia: an interactional process where political subjugation, religious ideology, and social solidarity co-produced a distinctive cultural response to empire. The findings reaffirm that understanding colonialism requires not only archival reconstruction but also interpretive engagement with the meanings people attached to their struggle. The novelty of this study lies in integrating these three domains into a unified analytical framework that repositions the Aceh War as both a historical phenomenon and a living discourse on identity, faith, and power.

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