

# Islamic revival and cultural diversity: *pesantren*'s configuration in contemporary Aceh, Indonesia

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## Abstract

This study aims at investigating the extent to which *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) in Aceh, Indonesia have flourished in encountering multicultural situations in the wake of a massive tsunami and post-separatist military conflict through the lens of Islamic revivalism. Almost two decades after the gigantic natural disaster in 2004 and the protracted bloody conflict, Aceh underwent various changes in social, economic, political, educational, and religious areas. In the educational and religious sectors, a pivotal metamorphose took place in *pesantren* as a means of Islamic revival, where this Islamic boarding school has transformed into multicultural institutions. Using a qualitative design, this study observed several *pesantren* in Aceh, interviewed their key stakeholders, and analyzed *pesantren* documents. The findings show that *pesantren* cultures in contemporary Aceh differ from previous monolithic traditional Islamic schools in curriculum, characteristics, typology, and affiliation. This change is a unique mark of an Islamic revival following the influx of the plural Indonesian and of the world communities to Aceh after the catastrophe and violence with their heterogeneous aids and cultural settings. In addition, the implementation of *sharia* (Islamic) law in this special province after both tragedies confirmed the work

of the Islamic revival, though many nationalists sharply criticize this sectarian and exclusive rule within multicultural countries like Indonesia. However, in this situation, *pesantren* in Aceh expressed a positive commitment to celebrating cultural diversity through ethnicity respect, religious tolerance, and Indonesian unity rather than endorsing the idea of an Islamic state.

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menelisik sampai sejauh mana pesantren di Aceh, Indonesia telah berkembang ketika menghadapi situasi multi kultur pascabencana besar tsunami dan pascakonflik separatis-militer melalui sudut pandang revivalisme Islam. Setelah satu setengah decade bencana tsunami pada tahun 2004 dan konflik berdarah yang berlarut-larut, Aceh mengalami banyak perubahan di bidang sosial, ekonomi, pendidikan, dan agama. Berkaitan dengan segi pendidikan dan agama, perubahan penting terjadi di pesantren sebagai sebuah kebangkitan Islam, dimana sekolah Islam berasrama ini telah berubah menjadi lembaga yang multikultur. Menggunakan desain qualitative, riset ini mengamati beberapa pesantren di Aceh dan mewawancarai para pemangku kepentingan utama mereka serta menganalisis berbagai dokumen pesantren. Temuan dari kajian ini menunjukkan bahwa budaya pesantren di Aceh saat ini telah mengalami konfigurasi dalam hal kurikulum, ciri khas, tipologi, dan afiliasi dari sebelumnya yang hanya berupa sekolah dengan satu ragam Islam tradisional. Keadaan ini merupakan satu karakter unik dari kebangkitan Islam seiring dengan masuknya masyarakat plural Indonesia dan dunia ke Aceh setelah bencana dan perselisihan dulu dengan membawa berbagai bantuan dan beraneka ragam kultur mereka. Selain itu, penerapan hukum syariah di provinsi khusus ini setelah kedua musibah tersebut menunjukkan bahwa kebangkitan Islam telah terjadi di Aceh, meskipun banyak nasionalis mengkritik dengan tajam penerapan hukum yang sektarian dan eksklusif ini di dalam negara multikultur seperti Indonesia. Namun demikian, dalam suasana ini, pesantren di Aceh menunjukkan komitmen positif untuk merayakan perbedaan dengan cara menghormati perbedaan etnis, menghargai toleransi agama, dan memilih persatuan Indonesia daripada mendukung ide negara Islam.

**Keywords:** *Islamic revival; Cultural diversity; Indonesian pesantren; Aceh, Sharia law*

## Introduction

Aceh attracted the world on 26 December 2004 when a huge tsunami, after the 9.1 magnitude earthquake, hit this westernmost special province of Indonesia. The natural monster wreaked havoc on the infrastructure and caused massive casualties. Traditional and modern markets, government buildings, and schools were heavily damaged. More than 228,000 people lost their lives<sup>1</sup>. The disaster left an additional blow to the previously protracted brutal conflict in the region between the separatist GAM (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* or Aceh Independence Movement) and the Indonesian military.

Following the calamity, massive and diverse aids from all over Indonesia and beyond flooded into Aceh to help in the recovery and development of entire sectors e.g. social, economic, and educational sectors<sup>2</sup>. Alongside with this relief, the helpers' various and different cultures, such as religion and beliefs, ethnicities, habits, visions, and behaviors were exposed directly to the Acehnese and challenged their existing cultures. As a result, Aceh, which had once adhered to traditional and monocultural Islam, has become more inclusive. Besides the deep misery caused by the tsunami, this catastrophe, on the other hand, brought about a peace agreement between GAM and the Indonesian government through the Helsinki peace accord on 15 August 2005<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the post-disaster and post-conflict development could possibly provide the Acehnese the possibility to re-arrange their new social, educational, and religious life with novel insights and horizons.

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<sup>1</sup>Lucy Rodgers and Gerry Fletcher, *Indian Ocean Tsunami: Then and Now*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30034501>, retrieved on 20 February 2021.

<sup>2</sup>Pedro-Luis Rojo, *Ten Years Ago, I was Deployed to the Tsunami-Hit City of Banda Aceh*, [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/blog/exactly-ten-years-ago-i-was-deployed-tsunami-hit-city-banda-aceh\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/blog/exactly-ten-years-ago-i-was-deployed-tsunami-hit-city-banda-aceh_en), retrieved on 3 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Edward Aspinall, *The Helsinki Agreement: A More Promising Basis for Peace in Aceh?*, Washington: East-West Center, 2005, Policy Studies 20.

In this regard, following the massive reconstruction, the Islamic revival precisely took a pivotal role in Aceh with its particular characteristic that was the implementation of the *sharia* law. The official enactment of this law by the government placed Aceh as the one and only province in Indonesia, out of 34 provinces, which practiced a sectarian and exclusive regulation. It is, to some extent, anti-cultural diversity in Aceh and Indonesia. Another sign of this revival was the appearance of several *pesantren* in Aceh with different learning models compared to the pre-disaster and pre-conflict period. A plethora of national and international Muslim organizations with diverse Islamic organization backgrounds involved in transferring aids and funds have influenced the flourishing of existing and mainstream traditional *pesantren* in Aceh<sup>4</sup>.

A large number of studies on social and educational development in post-disaster and post-conflict Aceh have been conducted. For example, Feener conducted research on the social engineering of Acehnese through *sharia* law implementation<sup>5</sup>. He analyzed that this implementation is a hotbed for the social transformation that allows Acehnese to obtain a bright future through a modern-Islamic vision, instead of the orthodox and traditional one. The problematic contestation between international development and protracted conflict in Aceh is studied by Baron, Karspinka, and Nugroho<sup>6</sup>. Shah and Cardoso studied education and social change of the Acehnese. They critically noted some educational and social development on the redistribution of educational access, (mis) representation of local governance, recognition of cultural diversity, and

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<sup>4</sup>Disbudpar Aceh, *Monumen Thanks to the World*, <https://disbudpar.acehprov.go.id/amp/monumen-thanks-to-the-world/>, retrieved on 10 March 2021.

<sup>5</sup>R. Michael Feener, "Social Engineering through Shari'a: Islamic Law and State-Directed Da'wa in Contemporary Aceh", *Indonesia Law Review*, Volume 3, Number 3 (2013), 285-310.

<sup>6</sup>P. Barron, Z. Karspinka, K. Nugroho, *The contested Corners of Asia, Subnational Conflict and International Development: The Case of Aceh, Indonesia*, Jakarta: Asia Foundation, 2013.

long-term effort for peaceful building amidst short-term aid<sup>7</sup>. However, there is a scarcity of research on the current configuration of *pesantren* in Aceh as a result of the influx of national and international philanthropists following two decades of the tragedies through the lens of Islamic revival.

In this context, Islamic revival is understood as a fundamental belief system to serve cultural defense, Islamic identity, and poverty alleviation<sup>8</sup>. Education is frequently a factor in revival movements, as educated people demand better change<sup>9</sup>. Murray states that the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 laid the groundwork for the twentieth-century revival of Islam<sup>10</sup>. In Indonesia, Muslim women are also the case to revive Islam including in the political field like women of *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (PKS or Justice and Prosperous Party)<sup>11</sup>. In the social field, women of *Muhammadiyah*, *Aisyiah*, and women of NU, *Muslimat*, the two largest Muslim organizations in the country, create the development of civil society<sup>12</sup>. This study proposes a new tenet that disaster and conflict could be the cause of Islamic revival and multicultural flourishing in *pesantren*, in addition to many other causes of Islamic revival around the world. The purpose of this research is to look into the multicultural status of today's *pesantren* in Aceh. In doing so, this article will be guided by the question of how and why the configuration

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<sup>7</sup>Rites Shah and Mieke T.A. Lopes Cardozo, "Education and Social Change in Post-Conflict and Post-Disaster Aceh, Indonesia", *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol. 38 (2014),1-21.

<sup>8</sup>Hakeem Onapajo, "Islamic Revivalism and Social Change in Muslim societies: A Rethink of Marxist Historical Materialism", *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization*, Volume 2, Number 4 (2012),196-205.

<sup>9</sup>Christine Binzel and Jean-Paul Carvalho, "Education, Social Mobility and Religious movements: The Islamic Revival in Egypt", *The Economic Journal*, Volume 127, Issue 607 (2017), 2553-2580.

<sup>10</sup>R. Murray Thomas, "The Islamic Revival and Indonesian Education", *Asian Survey*, Volume 28, Number 29 (1988), 897-915.

<sup>11</sup>Ai Fatimah Nur Fuad, "Da'wa and Politics: Lived Experiences of the Female Islamists in Indonesia", *Contemporary Islam*, Volume 14, Issue 1 (2020), 19-47.

<sup>12</sup>Rachel Rinaldo, "The Islamic Revival and Women's Political Subjectivity in Indonesia", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Volume 33, Issue 4 (2010), 422-431.

of *pesantren* in Aceh in the post-disaster and post-conflict period served as a means of Islamic revival. In this light, this study will examine various *pesantren* learning models and the extent to which they are committed to the country's and the world's cultural diversity within the context of *sharia* law implementation, particularly in ethnicities respect, religious tolerance, and the Islamic state establishment doctrine.

## **Islam in Aceh and Indonesian cultural diversity**

### *A brief history*

Islam arrived in Aceh with Arab Muslim traders from Gujarat, India, and directly from Arabs in the early 7th or 8th centuries<sup>13</sup>, while orientalist scholars such as Hurgronje, Marco Polo, and Ibn Batutah proposed in the 13th century<sup>14</sup>. A number of the traders and preachers married local women and established a Muslim village. They were also able to convince the ruler to convert into Islam and established an influential Islamic Sultanate in the international level in Malacca Strait, Samudra Pasai, in 1267 with Malik as-Saleh as the first Sultan<sup>15</sup>.

In 1521, Samudra Pasai was conquered by Portugal, and marked the beginning of the West's colonialism in Asia. However, another Islamic kingdom in this region emerged in 1524, Aceh Darussalaam<sup>16</sup>. During 1607-1636, Iskandar Muda as the Sultan of Aceh Darussalaam controlled a strong navy and army, authorized large territory, and led to enjoyed wealthy people. It was also a hub for Islamic education and pedagogy

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<sup>13</sup>Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII-XVIII*, Jakarta: Kencana Prenada Media Group, 2013. See also Aceh Government, *Aceh daerah pertama menerima Islam*, <https://acehprov.go.id/berita/kategori/jelajah/aceh-daerah-pertama-di-indonesia-menerima-islam>, retrieved on 5 April 2021.

<sup>14</sup>M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1300*, Second Edition, London: MacMillan, 1994.

<sup>15</sup>M. Zainuddin, *Tarich Atjeh dan Nusantara*, Medan: Pustaka Iskandar Muda, 1961.

<sup>16</sup>Ahmad Hasjmy, *Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam di Indonesia*, Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1990.

with the doctrine of monolithic Islamic Sufism as the mainstream Islamic teaching and implementation<sup>17</sup>.

Aceh Darussalam started to decline in 1873 when the Dutch began colonializing the Sultanate. Eventually Aceh affiliated with Indonesia, when this country was officially founded and declared its independence in 1945 as a democratic and multicultural state.

### *Aceh, military conflict, and sharia law*

In 1950, Aceh was structured under the North Sumatera province, which disappointed Teungku Daud Beureueh, Aceh's influential spiritual leader, who preferred to design Aceh as a specific Islamic province. Therefore, he merged with an insurgent group in West Java, which had a similar idea to establishing Islamic territory, *DI/TII (Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia or Islamic Territory/Indonesian Islamic Soldier)*.<sup>18</sup>

To cease this rebellion, in 1959, the central government in Jakarta granted a Special Province status to Aceh, containing three distinct independent governance rights, Islamic life, customary law, and the education system<sup>19</sup>. However, due to social-economic inequity, a group of Acehnese established a separatist movement namely GAM declared by Hasan Tiro<sup>20</sup> on 4 December 1976<sup>21</sup>, and started to attack a foreign company project and other central government's interests in Aceh.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>HAMKA, *Sejarah Umat Islam, Pra-Kenabian hingga Islam di Nusantara*, Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2016.

<sup>18</sup>Apipudin, "Daud Beureu'eh and the Rebellion of Islam in Aceh", *Buletin al-Turas, Mimbar Sejarah, Sastra, dan Agama*, Volume XXII, Number 1 (2016), 145-167.

<sup>19</sup>Al-Chaidar, *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka: Jihad Rakyat Aceh Mewujudkan Negara Islam*, Jakarta: Madani Press, 1999.

<sup>20</sup>Abu Jihad, *Pemikiran-pemikiran Politik Hasan Tiro dalam Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, Jakarta: Titian Ilmu Insani, 2000.

<sup>21</sup>Ahmad Farhan Hamid, *Jalan Damai Nanggroe Endatu: Catatan Seorang Wakil Rakyat Aceh*, Jakarta: Suara Bebas, 2006.

<sup>22</sup>Hasan Tiro, *Masa Depan Politik Dunia Melayu, Aceh*: Kementerian Penerangan Negara Aceh Sumatera, 1984.

To put down the uprising, President Soeharto designated Aceh as a DOM (*Daerah Operasi Militer* or Military Operation Zone) from 1989 to 1998. Thousands of soldiers were dispatched to Aceh. In 1999, the people of Aceh requested a referendum to secede from Indonesia via SIRA (*Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh* or Central Information of Aceh referendum)<sup>23</sup>. Following a peace agreement such as the CoHA (Cessation of Hostilities Agreement) in Geneva, President Megawati responded to this movement by declaring Aceh a Military Emergency Zone in 2003<sup>24</sup>. This status was maintained under President Yudhoyono's regime until 26 December 2004, when a mega tsunami, estimated to be 30 meters high, devastated Aceh.

Immediately after the devastating disaster, thousands of people and volunteers from around the country and the world descended on Aceh to aid in the recovery and reconstruction.<sup>25</sup> The BRR (*Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi* or Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency)<sup>26</sup> for Aceh and Nias noted that the rescue and recovery mission involved at least 653 funding agencies and 564 implementing partners from 56 countries, making it one of the largest humanitarian programs in history.<sup>27</sup> This situation provided the Acehnese to interact and be exposed to a massive multicultural atmosphere and ambience, which

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<sup>23</sup>Edward Aspinall, *Islam and Nation, Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia*, California: Stanford University Press, 2009.

<sup>24</sup>Antje Missbach, "Michelle Ann Miller 'Rebellion and Reform in Indonesia - Jakarta's Security and Autonomy Policies in Aceh'", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Volume 28, Issue 4 (2009), 145-151.

<sup>25</sup>Esthi Maharani, *Aceh Beri Apresiasi 53 Negara yang Bantu Saat Tsunami*, <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/qlya5i335/aceh-beri-apresiasi-53-negara-yang-bantu-saat-tsunami>, retrieved on May 2021. See also about the previous commemoration in Humas Aceh, *Gubernur Aceh: Terima Kasih Negara Donor*, <https://acehprov.go.id/berita/kategori/umum/gubernur-aceh-terima-kasih-negara-donor>, retrieved on May 2021.

<sup>26</sup>A state level agency formed by the government of Indonesia in April 2005.

<sup>27</sup>BRR NAD Nias, *Aceh dan Nias, Setahun Setelah Tsunami, Upaya Pemulihan dan Langkah ke Depan*, Laporan Bersama BRR dan Rekanan-rekanan Internasional, Desember 2005. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/394571468285605668/pdf/355070INDONESIA1Tsunami1Bhs01PUBLIC1.pdf> Retrieved on 5 April 2021. See also BPKP, *BRR Luncurkan Laporan Dua Tahun Tsunami*, <http://www.bpkp.go.id/berita/read/1893/8655/BRR-Luncurkan-Laporan-Dua-Tahun-Tsunami.bpkp>, retrieved on 10 April 2021.



made them more accepting of differences.<sup>28</sup> In addition, GAM and the Indonesian government paved the way for peace in Helsinki on 15 August 2005.<sup>29</sup>

During this condition, the province has still maintained a desire to formalize Islam in the constitution despite Indonesia's vast cultural diversity. As a result, the central government enacted regulation 11 in 2006, authorizing the Aceh government to implement *sharia* law<sup>30</sup>. While *sharia* law is viewed as sectarian and exclusive, former Aceh Governor, Zaini Abdullah asserted that it is specifically for Acehnese Muslims. Additionally, he reaffirmed Acehnese's commitment to always respecting and appreciating other religions and cultures. Indeed, there is concern that this situation will lead to the establishment of an Islamic state in Aceh<sup>31</sup>, a sensitive issue in democratic-plural Indonesia, which officially recognizes six religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, all of which are practiced in Aceh (See Table 1). *Sharia* law implementation also had an effect on *pesantren*.

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<sup>28</sup>Lilianne Fan, *Aceh's Unfinished Recovery*, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2014/12/26/aceh-s-unfinished-recovery>, retrieved on 13 March 2021.

<sup>29</sup>Michael Morfit, "The Road to Helsinki, The Aceh Agreement and Indonesia's Democratic Development", *International Negotiation*, Volume 12, Number 1 (2007), 111-143.

<sup>30</sup>Kemlu, *UU tentang Pemerintahan Aceh*, <https://pih.kemlu.go.id/files/UU%2011-%202006.pdf>, retrieved on 1 May 2021.

<sup>31</sup>Hasnil Basri Siregar, "Lessons Learned from the Implementation of Islamic Shari'ah Criminal Law in Aceh, Indonesia", *Journal of Law and Religion*, Volume 24, Number 1 (2008), 143-176.

Table 1. Aceh Demography

| Population<br>(1) | Number of Pesantren's<br>(2) |          | Number of<br>JHS+SHS's<br>(3) |          | Religions<br>(4)   | Ethnicities<br>and local<br>languages<br>(5)   | Local<br>Cultures<br>(6)                          |
|-------------------|------------------------------|----------|-------------------------------|----------|--|--|---|
|                   | institution                  | Students | institution                   | students |  |  |   |
| 5,090,412         | 879                          | 94,537   | 1,531                         | 333,035  | Islam<br>(98.4%),<br>Christian<br>(1.2%),<br>Catholicism<br>(0.1%),<br>Hinduism<br>(0.08%),<br>Buddhism<br>(0.22%) | 13<br>indigenous<br>ethnics<br>(Aceh,<br>Tamiang,<br>Gayo, Lues,<br>Haloban,<br>Nias, etc) | Saman<br>dance,<br>Bungong<br>Jeumpa<br>song, etc |

Source: The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) and National Statistical Bureau (2019)

### **Pesantren in Indonesia and Aceh**

*Pesantren* is an Islamic boarding school that is widely available in Indonesia. It is the country's oldest and most indigenous Islamic educational institution, having been established in the 17th century as a primary location for teaching and proselytizing Islam<sup>32</sup>. Similar institutions known as *pesantren*, or *pondok*, exist throughout Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and the southern provinces of Thailand<sup>33</sup>. Dhofier identified five characteristics of *pesantren*: *Kyai* as the supreme leader, mosque as the focal point of learning and worship, *kitab kuning* as the traditional Islamic sources of knowledge, *santri* as the students, and dormitory as the *santri*'s residence<sup>34</sup>. Currently, the archipelago has over

<sup>32</sup>Nurcholish Madjid, *Bilik-bilik Pesantren, Sebuah Potret Perjalanan*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1997.

<sup>33</sup>Gamal Abdul Nasir Zakaria, "Pondok Pesantren: Changes and its Future", *Journal of Islamic and Arabic Education*, Volume 2, Number 2 (2010), 45-52.

<sup>34</sup>Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *The Pesantren Tradition: The Role of The Kyai in The Maintenance of Traditional Islam in Java*, Arizona: Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1999.

28,000 *pesantren* with an estimated 3.5 million students, the majority of which are privately owned<sup>35</sup>.

*Pesantren* is officially recognized as part of the national education system by the Indonesian government through the National Education Act of 2003 and is administered by the MoRA<sup>36</sup>. As a result, in addition to teaching a large number of religious subjects, *pesantren* introduces national lessons such as *Pendidikan Kewarganegaraan* (PKN or Civic Education), sociology, and national history<sup>37</sup>. PKN educates students about their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a multicultural country like Indonesia, sociology familiarizes students with numerous Indonesian cultures, and national history discusses the country's existence as a result of the efforts of Indonesia's diverse people regardless of their ethnicities, tribes, religions, or social groups backgrounds.

The MoRA classifies *pesantren* into three broad typologies: *Ashry*, or modern, *Salafy*, or traditional, and *Campuran*, or mixed. Modern *pesantren* uses government-mandated curricula with a minimum of national subjects. Traditional *pesantren* complies only with the *pesantren* curriculum, which is purely Islamic studies without reference to the national curriculum, whereas mixed *pesantren* follows both modern and traditional curricula, with over 70% of subjects drawn from the national curriculum.<sup>38</sup>

*Pesantren* is referred to as *dayah* or *meunasah* in Aceh. Prior to the massive tsunami, *pesantren* in this region predominantly practiced orthodox and traditional Islam as a consequence of Aceh's long Islamic tradition legacy.

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<sup>35</sup>MoRA, *Pesantren Data Base*, <http://pendis.kemenag.go.id/file/dokumen/bukusaku1102.pdf>. and <https://ditpdpontren.kemenag.go.id/web/>, retrieved on 10 February 2021.

<sup>36</sup>Raihani, *Creating Multicultural Citizens, a Portrayal of Contemporary Indonesian Education*, London: Routledge, 2014.

<sup>37</sup>Raihani, "Report on Multicultural Education in *Pesantren*", *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, Volume 42, Issue 4 (2012), 585-605.

<sup>38</sup>Raihani, *Creating Multicultural Citizens...*

There are currently 879 *pesantren* in Aceh with over 116,000 students<sup>39</sup>. They are organized under two government boards: *Bidang Pendidikan Diniyah dan Pondok Pesantren* (Education Board of Diniyah and Pondok Pesantren), coordinated by the MoRA Aceh, and *Dinas Pendidikan Dayah* (Dayah Education Council), which is responsible for the Aceh special province government. This dualistic management is a product of the implementation of *sharia* law. *Pesantren* in Aceh have resurrected and flourished in the post-disaster and post-conflict eras by overcoming cultural differences through their curriculum, characteristics, typologies, and affiliation.

### **Pesantren configuration in contemporary Aceh**

This study observed nine *pesantren* in Aceh: *Daarul Qur'an Aceh (DQA)*, *Asaasunnajah*, *Ulee Titi*, *Sulaimaniyah*, *Baitul Arqam*, *al-Aziziyah*, *Tgk. Chiek Oemar Diyan (TCOD)*, *Inshafuddin*, and *Madrasah Ulumul Qur'an (MUQ)*. These *pesantren* were carefully chosen as samples that matched the study objective. Apart from observing all *pesantren* and conducting interviews with prominent figures, students, and other stakeholders, the researcher also studied pertinent *pesantren* documents.

The result of the field research found that each *pesantren* has its own specific curriculum, characteristics, typology, and affiliation. It means that *pesantren* in Aceh have flourished and configured in a variety of patterns.

*DQA* and *Asaasunnajah* have similarities in terms of curriculum and affiliation. They are closely related to *salafy*-Islamist ideology and use *pesantren* and national curriculum. *DQA* was established in 2016 as a continuation of the previous *pesantren* of *Darul Hijrah*, which was destroyed by the tsunami. It is located in Tumbo Baro village, Kuta

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<sup>39</sup>MoRA Aceh office branch. [https://aceh.kemenag.go.id/file/file/Data%20Pontren%202017/jumlah\\_lembaga\\_pondok\\_pesantren.htm](https://aceh.kemenag.go.id/file/file/Data%20Pontren%202017/jumlah_lembaga_pondok_pesantren.htm), retrieved on 3 June 2021.

Malaka, Aceh Besar regency on an area of seven hectares. Focusing on *Tahfidz* (memorizing) *Qur'an*, DQA operates Junior High School (JHS). Currently, DQA nurtures 66 male students, and mandates them to use Arabic in daily communication. DQA participates in the *Jaringan Sekolah Islam Terpadu* (JSIT or Integrated Islamic School Network), a new emerging school network affiliated with PKS. PKS is a militant and pivotal Islamic party in Indonesia, rooted in the 1980s as a young Muslim revivalist movement, which has indirect connection with *Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, an influential international Islamic movement from Egypt.<sup>40</sup>

*Asaasunnajah* is situated in Ateuk Lueng Ie village, Ingin Jaya, Aceh Besar. After the tsunami destroyed the previous *pesantren*'s site in Lhok Nga village, *Asaasunnajah* accepted several donations. *Pesantren* buildings, such as schools, dormitories, and offices, are constructed by renowned international companies and states like Samsung and the Chinese and Turkish governments, whose names are emblazoned on each structure. *Asaasunnajah* has around 300 male and female JHS and Senior High School (SHS) students within a three hectares area. In addition to the national curriculum used in daily schooling, the *pesantren* emphasizes Islamic spiritual studies and practices such as *Dzikir* (Remembering God, Allah) and *Sholawatan* (Praising the Prophet). *Dzikir* and *Sholawatan* are typically *pesantren* culture. It is unsurprisingly given that the supervisor of this *pesantren* is the late M. Arifin Ilham, a former popular national *Dzikir* leader who also managed a nationwide *pesantren*, *ad-Dzikra*, in Jakarta. Ilham is linked to the Indonesian *salafy-Islamist* group.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ai Fatimah Nur Fuad, "Da'wa and Politics:...", See also, Detha Arya Tifada, *Muslim Brotherhood: From Egypt to Indonesia then Live In PKS Ideology*, <https://voi.id/en/memori/56068/muslim-brotherhood-from-egypt-to-indonesia-then-live-in-pks-ideology>, retrieved on 3 June 2021.

<sup>41</sup>Julia Howell, "Sufism on The Silver Screen, Indonesian Innovations in Islamic Televangelism", *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Volume 02, Number 02, (2008), 225-239.

In terms of learning practice and affiliation, *Ulee Titi* and *Sulaimaniyah* are *Salafy-Traditional pesantren*. The name *Ulee Titi* was derived from the village where the *pesantren* is currently located in the district of Blang Bintang, Aceh Besar regency. *Ulee Titi* is a traditional *pesantren* and was one of the main genuine *pesantren* in Aceh prior to the tragedies. *Ulee Titi*, which was founded in the 19th century during the colonial era, merely teaches students the Islamic knowledge. The students are not grouped by age like the common public school, but by the level of study. *Ulee Titi* currently has approximately 1,750 students, with 750 males and 1,000 females.

*Sulaimaniyah* is an overseas *pesantren*—a Turkish educational model operated in Aceh. The focus of the study is to memorize *Qur'an* and to learn Islamic knowledge for SHS students' age. The long-term trajectory of its graduates is to continue their studies at the diploma level in Turkey under the scholarship of the Turkish society. However, to some extent, *Sulaimaniyah* acknowledges the national curriculum in the selected subjects like *PKn*. *Sulaimaniyah* has more than 30 *pesantren* in several provinces in Indonesia.

*TCOD* and *Inshafuddin* are independent *pesantren*. *TCOD* is located on ten hectares campus in Krueng Lamkareung village, Indrapuri, Aceh Besar regency. This *pesantren* was founded in 1990 on the initiative of *HMI*<sup>42</sup>, *PII*<sup>43</sup>, and *DDII*<sup>44</sup> activists, and has grown significantly in size in the years since the tragedies. The curriculum implemented in this *pesantren* is a synthesis of the curriculums of the MoRA *madrasah* and the renowned

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<sup>42</sup>*Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam*, an influential Islamic university student organization established in 1947.

<sup>43</sup>*Pelajar Islam Indonesia*, a prominent Indonesian Muslim student organization founded in 1947.

<sup>44</sup>*Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia*, a national *da'wa* (calling for Islam) council built in 1967.

*pesantren Gontor* in Ponorogo, East Java. TCOD currently educates 874 male and female students.

*Dayah Terpadu Inshafuddin* is the official name of *Inshafuddin* in Lambaro Skep village, Kuta Alam, Banda Aceh regency. This *pesantren* began as a private Islamic school in 1974 and expanded into a *pesantren* in 1998. Since then, the curriculum of this *pesantren* has been a fusion of *salafy pesantren* and national curriculum, resulting in a *Campuran pesantren*. In addition, several extra-curricular activities are offered, such as scouting, sports club, local dance, Arabic and English, martial arts, and *Kitab Kuning* studies. *Inshafuddin* also nurtures some students from Thailand. Located in an area of more than 0.5 hectares, *Inshafuddin* manages 316 male and female students. After the catastrophes, *Inshafuddin* extended its slogan to a more multicultural sense as *wadah pemersatu umat* (a place to unify Muslims), which attempts to accommodate all Muslim groups.

MUQ was established in 1989 as an official model of government *pesantren* in Aceh, and it is the first *pesantren* that promotes 30 chapters of Qur'anic memorization instruction. Situated in Pagar Air village, Ingin Jaya, Aceh Besar regency, after the conflict and tsunami, MUQ postulated its mission to be more open to fostering creative, plural, and responsible generation. MUQ runs public schools during the day and a *pesantren* system during the afternoon and evening. MUQ is managed by the *Dinas Pendidikan Dayah Aceh* special province. Therefore, this *pesantren* adheres to the national and *pesantren* curricula.

*Baitul Arqam*, founded in 2012, is a *pesantren* affiliated with *Muhammadiyah*. Located in Tampok Blang village, Sukamakmur, Sibreh, Aceh Besar regency, *Baitul Arqam* currently supervises 64 students, consisting of 39 male and 25 female pupils, who live on a five-hectare complex. The students' intake utilizes *Muhammadiyah* network. They are sent from regencies in Aceh through the recommendation of the local

*Muhammadiyah* council. During the post-conflict and-tsunami recovery period, this *pesantren* received assistance from the Australian Embassy in Indonesia to build *pesantren*'s offices, in addition to benefits from national donors.

*Al-Aziziyah* was a *salafy pesantren* when it was founded in 2011 as the 181st branch of the *pesantren MUDI Samalanga* mosque network<sup>45</sup>. However, in 2014, the surrounding community asked this *pesantren* to open a formal school that followed the national curriculum, and it was categorized as *Campuran pesantren*. *Al-Aziziyah* has about 215 students, with 50 of them staying in the *pesantren* as *mukim* (students who live in the *pesantren* dormitory) and the rest commuting. This *pesantren* is situated on 2.5 hectares land in Lampeuneurut, Ujung Blang village, Darul Imarah, Aceh Besar regency. The educational system follows the national school model during the day and conforms to *salafy pesantren* during the afternoon and evening. As in the *NU pesantren*, *Sorogan* (personal visit to the *Kyai*) and *Bandongan* (group visit to the *Kyai*) are used as instruction methods in delivering *Kitab Kuning* to students and neighboring communities, similar to *Dalail Khoiroh* for Islamic mysticism ritual. Unsurprisingly, a large number of *pesantren* teachers are *NU* activists.

According to the preceding presentation, post-conflict and post-disaster *pesantren* in Aceh have evolved and configured from monocultural and traditional *pesantren* into some patterns, most notably in curriculum, characteristic, typology, and affiliation (See table 2).

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<sup>45</sup>A popular Islamic organization network in Aceh which controls more than hundreds *pesantren*. For instance, see <https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/117437/dayah-mudi-samalanga-buka-pendaftaran-santri-baru-lebih-awal>, retrieved on 10 March 2021.



**Table 2. Pesantren Configuration in Contemporary Aceh**

| No. | Pesantren                     | Curriculum             | Characteristic                 | The MoRA typology |       |          | Affiliation                                 |
|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|-------|----------|---|
|     |                               |                        |                                | Salafy            | 'Asry | Campuran |   |
| 1.  | <i>Darul Qur'an Aceh</i>      | National and Pesantren | <i>Tahfidz Qur'an</i> , School |                   | √     |          | Salafy-Islamist                             |
| 2.  | <i>Asaasunnajah</i>           | National and Pesantren | Islamic Knowledge, School      |                   |       | √        | Salafy-Islamist                             |
| 3.  | Ulee Titi                     | Pesantren              | Islamic Knowledge              | √                 |       |          | Salafy-Traditional                          |
| 4.  | <i>Sulaimaniyah</i>           | Pesantren              | <i>Tahfidz Qur'an</i>          | √                 |       |          | Salafy-Traditional, Trans-nasional (Turkey) |
| 5.  | <i>Baitul Arqam</i>           | National and Pesantren | Islamic Knowledge, School      |                   | √     |          | Muhammadiyah                                |
| 6.  | <i>Al-Aziziyah</i>            | National and Pesantren | Islamic knowledge, School      |                   |       | √        | <i>Nahdhatul Ulama (NU)</i>                 |
| 7.  | Tgk. Chiek Oemar Diyan        | National and Pesantren | Islamic Knowledge, School      |                   | √     |          | Independent                                 |
| 8.  | <i>Inshafuddin</i>            | National and Pesantren | Pesantren, School              |                   | √     |          | Independent                                 |
| 9.  | <i>Madrasah Ulumul Qur'an</i> | National and Pesantren | <i>Tahfidz Qur'an</i> , School |                   |       | √        | Government                                  |

Source: Author's compilation based on field research, interview and documents review.

### **Pesantren configuration reasons in Aceh**

To gain a better understanding of this recent cultural flourishing, the researcher interviewed *pesantren's* key stakeholders, including *Kyai*, teachers, and the MoRA local officer. The research revealed three rationales. They are organizational influence, trans-national spirit, and Islamic renewal.

#### *Organizational influence*

The formation of *pesantren* in Aceh is influenced in part by the national Islamic organization. *Baitul Arqam*, for example, clearly belongs to

*Muhammadiyah*, which also runs a thousand schools, *pesantren*, and universities across the country. A *Muhammadiyah* activist and administrator in Aceh uttered as follows:

Pesantren Baitul Arqam is established by Muhammadiyah Aceh branch. Australian embassy involved in the building of pesantren office as part of the tsunami aid. We utilize Muhammadiyah network to develop this pesantren<sup>46</sup>.

In fact, Muhammadiyah Boarding School (MBS) is a new emerging *pesantren* model that is currently developed by Muhammadiyah in Indonesia<sup>47</sup>. NU has the similar pattern with *pesantren al-Aziziyah* as the model. DQA is yet another organizational influence figure on Aceh's *pesantren* configuration. The leader stated:

DQA has close ties to the JSIT and has joined it. Thus, we follow some activities in JSIT programs<sup>48</sup>.

### *Trans-national spirit*

*Sulaimaniyah* in Aceh is an appealing example of how *pesantren* have diversified in an international sense. There are currently three *Sulaimaniyah pesantren* in Aceh. Suharto states that trans-national Islam has been increasing within the last two decades<sup>49</sup>. It is characterized by the sense of Muslim brotherhood throughout the globe, like *Hizb Tahrir*, *ISIS*, *Jama'ah Islamiyah*, etc., which attract and implicate numerous Muslims across the world<sup>50</sup>. Regarding the reason for the establishment of *Sulaimaniyah* in Aceh, its manager expressed:

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<sup>46</sup>Online interview with Hasan, 46 years old, 18 August 2020.

<sup>47</sup>Iwan Kuswandi, "Dinamika Pendidikan Pesantren di Muhammadiyah", *Sahih, Journal of Islamicate Multidisciplinary*, Volume 5, Number 1 (2020), 65-77.

<sup>48</sup>Interview with Ali, 38 years old, 10 September 2019.

<sup>49</sup>Toto Suharto, "Transnational Islamic Education in Indonesia: an Ideological Perspective", *Contemporary Islam*, Volume 12, Issue 2 (2018), 101-122.

<sup>50</sup>Christophe Jaffrelot and Laurence Louer (Ed.), *Pan-Islamic Connections, Transnational Networks Between South Asia and the Gulf*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

*We had to take action after the tsunami hit Aceh. We also see that, following the long conflict, Aceh is conducive to the spread of our educational system, which upholds and maintains traditional Islamic teachings based on the Hafidz Qur'an. And the Aceh atmosphere supports us with its vast, traditional Islamic practice<sup>51</sup>.*

Nowadays, in Indonesia there are several Turkish school models, such as *Bunga Bangsa* in Aceh, *Semesta* in Semarang, Central Java, and *Kesatuan Bangsa* in Yogyakarta. These schools come with a boarding system and emphasize science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) advancement<sup>52</sup>. *Sulaimaniyyah* system is an addition to these existing Turkish schools which offers religious studies excellent.

### *Islamic renewal*

Numerous Muslims in Aceh have made efforts to modernize and renew the quality of the existing traditional *pesantren* like Ulee Titi. In this case, long before the tsunami - during the conflict era - the Aceh government established MUQ, an unusual policy for the government to have a *pesantren* because it is typically privately run. Following this example, *Inshafuddin* expanded its education system independently by adhering to the national curriculum, and *Asaasunnajah* constructed the Islamic sufism practice as an Islamic spiritual supplement for students to broaden its educational method. One of the *Kyai* in these *pesantren* reported:

*We have to renew Islamic teachings and methods, including in pesantren. Thus, it will not be outdated. It is permissible to use new technology and systems from the modern world to educate our children<sup>53</sup>.*

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<sup>51</sup>Interview with Gulen, 41 years old, 11 September 2019.

<sup>52</sup>These institutions belong to *Passiad* foundation of Turki network with dozens of schools in Indonesia.

<sup>53</sup>Interview with Husein, 57 years old, 15 September 2019.

Islamic renewal is not an alien to Islamic history. Lapidus demonstrates numerous events that influenced the renewal of Islamic practice, one of which was the Islamic movement for modernity in response to the Islamic empire's collapse in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Middle East<sup>54</sup>. In the educational field, what *Muhammadiyah* did in the early nineteenth century to modernize its educational system by emulating Western models was a radical departure from the established traditional Islamic learning of the era and was unmistakably an example of Islamic renewal<sup>55</sup>.

According to a MoRA Aceh official, the phenomenon of Islamic revival in post-conflict and post-disaster situations is unsurprising, as Muslims in Aceh have inherited a long Islamic tradition and will be able to effectively address several challenges. He said:

We are used to the joys and sorrows of facing various challenges. Since the Sultanate era and colonial era in the past to the current time. Islam will always be in the Acehnese heart<sup>56</sup>.

The implementation of *sharia* law is one of the most contentious issues in contemporary Aceh. There is a widespread concern at the national and international level that this law will jeopardize the country's cultural diversity. To address this issue, this study elicited responses from participants in *pesantren* regarding multicultural issues, specifically their attitudes toward ethnicities respect, religious tolerance, and the Islamic state establishment.

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<sup>54</sup>Ira M. Lapidus, "Islamic Revival and Modernity: the Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Volume 40, Number 4, (1997), 444-460.

<sup>55</sup>Hidayatullah Azra, "Islamic Education in Indonesia", in Holger Daun and Reza Arjmand, *Handbook of Islamic Education*, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2018, 763-780.

<sup>56</sup>Interview with Hakim, 45 years old, 15 September 2019.

## **Pesantren multicultural attitude under the sharia law**

### *Ethnicities respect*

This study questioned the students, teachers and the *pesantren* leaders about their tenets on appreciating other ethnicities. The respondents stated that Aceh has been accustomed to cultural differences, and ethnic differences are no exception. A *pesantren*'s *Kyai* expressed his opinion that:

*Aceh used to multicultural environment since a long time ago. Thus, there will be no conflict between different ethnicities under sharia law*<sup>57</sup>.

Confirming this finding, the Indonesian harmony index indicated that Aceh has among the highest score in comparison to other parts of the country<sup>58</sup>. There were rarely social and ethnic conflict cases over the last decade.

### *Religious tolerance*

As the majority, Muslims in Aceh are also aware of the minority religions entity. Depicting *sharia* law enactment and religious tolerance in Aceh, the participants claimed that non-Muslims have no difficulty residing in the province. In addition, they revealed their willingness to interact with them in the social life. A teacher explained his notion as follows:

*Qur'an said clearly; lakum diinukum wa liya diin, for you your religion and for me my religion. We have to follow this rule. As long as non-Muslims don't bother us, we can live together here*<sup>59</sup>.

The MoRA classified Aceh's tolerance index as low in 2019<sup>60</sup>, which

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<sup>57</sup>Interview with Ubaidillah, 60 years old, 15 September 2019.

<sup>58</sup>Setkab, *Democracy Index Improves; Religious Harmony Decline: Govt*, <https://setkab.go.id/en/democracy-index-improves-religious-harmony-declines-govt/>, retrieved on 7 June 2021.

<sup>59</sup>Interview with Said, 41 years old, 15 September 2019.

<sup>60</sup>MoRA, *Executive Summary, Survey Indeks Kerukunan Umat Beragama Tahun 2019*, <https://simlitbangdiklat.kemenag.go.id/simlitbang/spdata/upload/dokumen->

was then rejected by Acehnese religious leaders due to their peaceful and harmonious coexistence reality<sup>61</sup>. However, accidents involving Muslim and non-Muslim interaction do occur on occasion. A case was an incident on the church establishment in Aceh Singkil in 2015. The chief of *Pusat Kerukunan Umat Beragama (PKUB* or Center for Religious Harmony) of the MoRA in Jakarta then clarified that it was a small misunderstanding on administration to build a prayer premise. Once the Christians provide complete documents, they are allowed to build a church<sup>62</sup>.

### *The Islamic state establishment*

Indonesia was founded as a democracy and a multicultural nation rather than an Islamic state even though Muslims are dominant. The Nationalists were concerned that *sharia* law could pave the way for the establishment of an Islamic state<sup>63</sup>. However, *pesantren* stake holders assured that *sharia* law is merely to provide a conducive premise for Muslims to practice their religious beliefs. They will continue to support Indonesia's democracy and unity. The MoRA Aceh officer depicted:

*In Aceh, we like to practice Islamic teachings in an Islamic environment through sharia law. However, it doesn't mean that we will establish an Islamic state. We only regulate our local education and religious practice; the rest is regulated by central government*<sup>64</sup>.

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penelitian/1586237704Exsum\_Penelitian\_KUB\_2019.pdf retrieved on 1 June 2021.

<sup>61</sup>MoRA Aceh, FKUB dan Tokoh Lintas Agama di Aceh Bahas Hasil Survei Indeks Kerukunan 2019, <https://aceh.kemenag.go.id/berita/508793/fkub-dan-tokoh-lintas-agama-di-aceh-bahas-hasil-survei-indeks-kerukunan-2019> retrieved on 1 June 2021.

<sup>62</sup>Salihin Barus, *Isu Konflik Beragama Tidak Ada di Aceh Singkil*, <https://rri.co.id/daerah/907178/isu-konflik-beragama-tidak-ada-di-aceh-singkil> retrieved on 2 June 2021.

<sup>63</sup>Rivan Dwiastono, *Perda Syariah di Indonesia: Antara Kearifan Lokal, Politik Elektoral dan Ancaman Terhadap Kebhinnekaan*, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia49332135> retrieved on 1 June 2021.

<sup>64</sup>Interview with Hakim, 45 years old, 15 September 2019.

A female student in the XII grade emphasized the preceding argument by saying:

We love Indonesia, but we love Aceh too as an Islamic province<sup>65</sup>.

Mahmud, a teacher, described his argument on this issue:

*I think, after a long conflict and stopped by the tsunami, Acehnese agree to life in harmony under Indonesian government. This is what I deliver to the students; live in Aceh under the sharia law but within Indonesian unity*<sup>66</sup>.

In fact, over the last 1.5 decades, the issue of separatism and the GAM movement has dwindled significantly. Aceh has been developing as a religious region within the authority of Indonesia. However, there was occasional friction between ex-GAM supporters and the central government, such as in 2020 when the GAM flag was raised alongside the Indonesian flag on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the peace agreement.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

This study shows how *pesantren* in Aceh currently have evolved and changed into a variety of configuration in terms of curriculum, characteristics, typology, and affiliation towards national and international multicultural communities in the post-conflict and post-tsunami eras. External and internal factors such as Islamic organizational influence, transnational spirit, and Islamic renewal all contributed to this configuration. The configuration altered the landscape of *pesantren*, which had previously been dominated by monoculture and traditional Islamic style.

The transformation of *pesantren* in Aceh continued a long tradition of Islamic revival in this region dating all the way back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when

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<sup>65</sup>Interview with Hanum, 16 years old, 10 September 2019.

<sup>66</sup>Interview with Mahmud, 36 years old, 10 September 2019.

<sup>67</sup>Masriadi and Daspriani Y Zamzami, *Bendera Bulan Bintang Berkibar di Aceh, Polisi: Kita Sudah Bernegosiasi, Tapi...*, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/08/16/05300091/bendera-bulan-bintang-berkibar-di-aceh-polisi-kita-sudah-bernegosiasi-tapi> retrieved on 15 May 2021.

Islam made its first appearance. Along with the *pesantren* configuration, Aceh's Islamic revival is characterized by the implementation of *sharia* law, which is viewed as sectarian and exclusive toward Indonesia's vast multi-cultural population by the nationalists. However, this study demonstrated that *pesantren* in Aceh continue to value and celebrate cultural diversity, most notably by respecting different ethnic groups, tolerating other religions, and advocating for a democratic Indonesia rather than an Islamic state establishment.

This research opens up new possibilities for decision makers in Aceh and Indonesia when it comes to *pesantren* policy making. Furthermore, because this study only looked at nine *pesantren*, further research with a broader and more comprehensive sample of respondents on the related topic is recommended.

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