Introduction

INNER ISLAM AND THE PROBLEM OF ACEHNESE EXCEPTIONALISM

People in Aceh are often uncertain of how to be, or become, good Muslims. Developing a concept of religious agency, this book analyzes how Acehnese Muslims have interacted, on an everyday basis, with the universalizing norms and structural constraints posited by the state and organized religion. As such, it counters a common view that has conflated Acehnese religiosity with an essentialized image of piety and fanaticism. At the same time, the case of Aceh serves to address an urgent and more general problem. During the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, state and religious authorities throughout the world increased their influence on the religious lives of local communities and individual Muslims. This book examines how ordinary Muslims have dealt with this development. It argues that individual believers exercise considerable agency as they navigate, negotiate, and (re-)appropriate official religious norms. This agency, I contend, is not external to religion. It is a religious agency, contingent on the continuous interaction between ordinary Muslims and the forces of normative Islam, and grounded in a widely shared conception of religious life as a conscious, reflective, and highly personal project of ethical improvement.

Drawing on a combination of historical and ethnographic research, this book analyzes the dynamic and shifting interactions among state actors, religious authorities, and ordinary Muslims. To this end, it discusses a range of different, concrete case studies, processes, and situations, bearing on issues such as the gradual interference of the colonial and postcolonial
state in religious practices, rituals, and sites; changing relations between local communities and religious institutions; village conflicts and perceived crises of moral authority; shifting commitments to community and family; processes of religious revitalization in the wake of civil war and natural disaster; changing religious routines and practices; and extended trajectories of individual religiosity. What follows, then, is both a detailed analysis of Acehnese religious life and an investigation of the salience in today’s world of personal processes of ethical formation.

My argument resonates with a broader trend in the anthropology of Islam that has emphasized personal piety and religious experience. However, in contrast to the recent academic (and political) interest in religious movements and organizations, I am not concerned primarily with pursuits of pious perfection, or modes of self-discipline associated with Islamic activism and the contemporary resurgence of political Islam. Doubt, ambivalence, indifference, and self-perceived religious negligence, I contend, are equally and inextricably part of ethical formation. People in Aceh consciously reflect and act on these perceptions of failure and imperfection as they link them to, and interpret them in conjunction with their lives’ unfolding. Indeed, I argue that it is the very sense of a life trajectory, one that consists of a past, a present, and a future, that makes perceptions of failure ethically productive rather than devastating. A central theme, then, concerns the ways in which experiences of age; generation; life phase and life stage transition; and closely related concepts of moral responsibility, disappointment, and intention feed into the making of religious subjectivities.

A Narrative of Violence and Piety

In most constructions of Acehnese ethnic identity, Islam takes center stage. It is commonly considered that to be Acehnese, apart from speaking any dialect of the Acehnese language, following local customs (adat), and identifying with the Acehnese past, means to be Muslim. Indeed, the Acehnese are known as a pious people, who famously refer to their homeland as the “Veranda of Mecca” (Serambi Mekkah). The latter notion also has another, more political meaning, however. Firmly attached to the claim that Aceh upholds a special relationship with the Islamic heartland is the (politically malleable) assertion that Acehnese Muslims, by simple virtue of being Acehnese Muslims, have a particular responsibility to advance their religion and to engage in “proper” Muslim conduct.

Much has been written about political Islam and religious disciplining in Aceh, from the establishment of religious courts by the pre- and early modern sultanate state to the implementation of Islamic law today (Aspinall 2009; Feener 2013; Hadi 2004; Ito 1984; Lindsey et al. 2007; Lombard 1967;
McGibbon 2006; Miller and Feener 2012; Nur Ichwan 2007, 2011; Riddell 2006; Sjamsuddin 1985; van Dijk 1981). These studies, while analyzing important aspects of Aceh’s history and society, have also contributed to the stereotype of Acehnese specialness and pious self-awareness. Relatively little is known, in contrast, about the question of how “ordinary” Acehnese Muslims, without much power, influence, or advanced religious knowledge (Peletz 1997), have shaped and adjusted their own behavior in relation to these processes. How do ordinary Acehnese shape and experience their daily lives? What old or newly formed religious routines and practices do they engage in? How do they deal with the increasing range and intensity of moral admonitions, purist pressures, and knowledge regimes advanced by the state, religious authorities, and other public actors? Formulating an answer to these questions is the main goal of this book.

The idea that the Acehnese are an exceptionally pious people is partly rooted in the contention that Pasai (near present-day Lhokseumawe, on the North Coast) was the first kingdom in the archipelago to convert to Islam. In the sixteenth century, the Sultanate of Aceh incorporated Pasai, as well as a number of other ports in the Strait of Malacca, after which it developed into the most powerful kingdom in the western part of the Malay world. The epitome of this power was the legendary Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–37). His rule is remembered as Aceh’s “golden age” (zaman mas), a time in which the kingdom was powerful and Islamic law was properly enforced.1 The image of a long-standing piety is further fueled by the memory of the colonial period (1873–1942). The armed struggle against the Dutch was led by ulama—religious teachers—and perceived by Acehnese fighters as a “holy war” (perang sabil).2 A war literature emerged, which presented the resistance as a religious duty. In the eyes of colonial administrators, such expressions attested to the Acehnese’s deeply rooted religious fanaticism.

In 1945, Aceh became a province of the newly independent Indonesian nation. While the idea of Indonesia was embraced by a majority of Acehnese, the first governor of Aceh, the reformist Islamic teacher and activist Teungku Daud Beureueh, was straightforward about his aspiration to create an Islamic polity. His government prepared for the establishment of a system of Islamic courts (Mahkamah Syariah), to be placed under the control of religious scholars and to function autonomously from the central government. This move was contested, however, and ultimately the attempt to transform the political and legal system failed, partly because of a lack of support from conservative Islamic leaders. Disappointment among reformist ulama, together with a range of social and economic factors, culminated in 1953 in the outbreak of an armed rebellion under the banner of Darul Islam (The Abode of Islam). The goal of this revolt, which had started in West Java in 1949, was to establish an “Islamic State of Indonesia” (Negara Islam Indonesia, NII). In Aceh, the conflict ended in 1962,
when the central government granted the Acehnese provincial government special autonomy in the domains of religion, education, and local customs.

The promise of autonomy remained unfulfilled. Under President Suharto’s dictatorial “New Order” regime (1965–98), power was concentrated in Jakarta. When, in the early 1970s, enormous reserves of oil and natural gas were discovered near the city of Lhokseumawe (North Aceh), Jakarta’s policy of appropriating local resources sowed the seeds for a new conflict. In 1976, Hasan di Tiro, a former Darul Islam supporter and the grandson of a famous Islamic scholar and leader in the war against the Dutch, founded Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM). Although GAM came forth, at least partly, from Darul Islam, this was a very different kind of revolt. Its leaders did not aspire to make the Indonesian state more Islamic. Instead, they developed a secular, ethno-nationalist discourse, aimed at separating Aceh from Indonesia altogether and at restoring the region’s precolonial status as an independent polity. The conflict caused massive disruptions, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s, claiming twelve to twenty thousand lives, perhaps even more (Aspinall 2009, 2).

During the conflict, the Indonesian government and military actively cultivated the stereotype of Acehnese religious fanaticism in order to frame the rebellion as being “Islamic” in character, a rather skewed image that echoes in some scholarly works as well (see, e.g., Geertz 2004, 579; Vickers 2005, 179–80; Voll 1994, 344). In 1999, one year after the collapse of the New Order, Aceh was allowed by the central government to implement a regional formulation of shari’ā (a term that literally means “the way” or “the path,” but is often translated as “Islamic law”). This initiative was part of a new autonomy package meant to take away some of the long-standing grievances against the state, to diminish the rebellion’s popular support, and, ultimately, to end the conflict. It was rejected by the leaders of GAM, who saw in Jakarta’s turn to Islam a move to deflect attention from the roots of the conflict and delegitimize the separatists in the eyes of the Acehnese people and international actors.

The establishment of a shari’ā legal system was initiated in 2002–2003, when Governor Abdullah Puteh issued a series of bylaws (qanun) regulating creed (aqida), worship (ibadah), and religious symbolism (syrar), as well as the criminal persecution of individuals engaging in the use of intoxicants (khamr), gambling (maisir), and illicit relations between men and women (khalwat). A new set of institutions, including a shari’ā police force (Wilayatul Hisbah, WH), was created to enforce and socialize these regulations. After the December 2004 tsunami had ravaged Banda Aceh and the Acehnese West Coast, large numbers of humanitarian workers flocked into the province. They acted as informal observers of the conflict. In August 2005, a peace agreement was signed. GAM was disarmed and turned into a political party, the “Aceh Party” (Partai Aceh, PA), which has been in power at the provincial level and in most districts ever since. The stance of PA toward the implementation of shari’ā has
been ambiguous. While some of Aceh’s new leaders became vocal advocates of the new laws, others made clear that they prioritized different issues.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given these developments, the dominant narrative of Acehnese history and society merges together a strong regional attachment, a fraught relationship with Jakarta, a perceived primacy of Islamic law, and a pious outlook that sets the Acehnese apart from other peoples in Indonesia. Besides being prevalent in written work and everyday speech, these stereotypes inform the ways in which the people of Aceh and Acehnese culture are represented in books, films, street names, and tourist attractions (see Drexler 2008, 49–67). This narrative is problematic. In most studies of Aceh, Islam is presented as a factor of change only when it reveals itself as an ideology that legitimizes political action (see, e.g., Aspinall 2009; Kell 1995; McGibbon 2006; Morris 1983; Reid 1979, 2006a; G. Robinson 1998; Sjamsuddin 1985; Sulaiman 1997; van Dijk 1981). The consequence is a conflation of Islam and violence, based on a dubious connection between Aceh’s reputation as a place from which the Islamic faith spread into Southeast Asia and its history of struggle. At the same time, the self-explanatory status of Acehnese piety has rendered the study of the region almost immune to the analysis of deep social and religious change, including, ironically, the increasing prominence of Islam in the public sphere, the increasing pervasiveness of formalized Islamic authority, and the impact of these developments on everyday lives.

The people I came to know during my research were generally not fanatical, rebellious, inflexible, or dogmatic. They did, however, take their faith seriously and often wished or hoped for others to do the same. I was surprised, moreover, by the confidence, patience, and eloquence of many of my interlocutors, as they explained to me that faith (iman) and worship (ibadah) should be understood not as a given, but instead as a lifelong process, part of a personal project of ethical improvement. This book conceives of this mentality as a particular ethical mode, which is based on a habit of continuous, critical reflection on morally defined choices, decisions, and dilemmas, and that indicates, in turn, a particular form of agency (defined as a “socio-culturally mediated capacity to act”; Ahearn 2001, 112). This religious agency, and the dynamic interactions through which it is shaped, is the central focus of this study.

To take religious agency seriously entails a nuanced approach that places Islam in the context of multiple moral-intellectual frameworks, or to borrow from Alasdair MacIntyre (1988), multiple “traditions of moral inquiry.” It entails focusing less on the question of what shape, or shapes, Islam takes in any given place (radical, moderate, scripturalist, mystical, syncretistic), and more on the question of how people of different backgrounds try to make the best of their lives while they ask themselves, simultaneously, “How can I be, or become, a good human being?” (Schielke 2009a, 165). It entails, as Magnus Marsden has argued in his work on lived Islam in Pakistan, posing the question
of how ordinary Muslims actively engage with the forces of normative Islam (including the pressures of globally salient Islamist movements and their call for religious purification), and how they “think, reflect, and debate the circumstances of the world around them, and make active and varying decisions about what kind of Muslim life to lead” (M. Marsden 2005, 10). This book shows how people in Aceh, over a very long period of time, have learned to be conscious of, and articulate about, their existence as individual Muslims living in a world of moral uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction, and doubt. Their religious agency should be seen as neither isolated from, nor a form of resistance against, state and religious authorities. Instead, it is the product of dynamic interactions, contingent on the contested meaning of Aceh as a social and geographic space and the place of Islam in historically shaped political visions.

There is, as the case of Aceh shows, a paradoxical side to the rise of normative Islam. While the prescription of “correct” Islamic behavior places particular constraints on the lives of Muslims, the establishment of official norms is, at the same time, perceived by many ordinary believers as enabling in nature because it entails and invites conscious reflection on their own religious lives. By encouraging and forcing individuals to engage consciously, probingly, and reflexively with their own faith, the forces of normative Islam produce space for action as much as they restrict individuals in their personal and collective moral endeavors. As I demonstrate in the chapters to follow, people in Aceh are deeply aware of this tension. The next section elaborates my approach and the contribution of my argument to the history and anthropology of Islam more broadly.

Religious Agency and Ethical Improvement: An Interactive Approach

The state and organized religion are comparable forces in the sense that they constitute relatively coherent (albeit changing) sets of norms and values, relatively coherent sets of standardizing institutions, and distinct hierarchies and networks of individuals. They have also become increasingly intertwined as the modern state has tried to regulate religion while religious actors, in turn, have sought to Islamize the state. Individuals, meanwhile, exert religious agency as they negotiate, select, reject, ignore, redefine, or appropriate these norms to address their own particular goals and desires. This dynamic, tripartite relationship is at the core of this book. I start this section, therefore, by briefly explaining my approach to the concepts of state, religious authority, and the individual.

The state is regarded in this study both as an actor (or a set of actors) and as an arena of contestations (see Barker and van Klinken 2009; Feener, Kloos, and Samuels 2015). The state seeks (among its other roles) to enforce norms. At the same time, groups or individuals address or solicit the state to a variety
of ends. Using the state may mean deploying laws or institutions (for example, to coerce people into changing their behavior or to gain access to particular resources) or a particular language or idiom (for example, about the “correct” interpretation of Islam) to realize strategic positions; to mobilize, persuade, or intimidate; or to provide a person or institution with legitimacy. A similar view applies, albeit in a somewhat different way, to religious institutions. While religious experts may use their authority to formulate or prescribe religious norms, the social, political, and pedagogical spaces over which they preside constitute important sites of negotiation and moral contestation. With regard to the historical, sociological, and philosophical qualities of the individual and the “self,” finally, I follow Charles Taylor’s (1989) thesis that questions of identity cannot be viewed separately from the historical formation of moral subjectivity, and that the remaking of both “self” and “morality” is a key trait of what we call modernity. I agree, in addition, with Craig Calhoun (1991), who argues that, although Taylor’s work is based primarily on the ideas of “Great Men,” his discursive approach of viewing the self as a moral subject offers a particularly good starting point for enriching our understanding of identity and agency.

In reality, of course, there is a continuous overlap between these different spheres. Lay Muslims may, at any point in their lives, be regarded by their peers as religious authorities. Ulama may become agents of the state. And agents of the state are always also individuals, that is, moral beings who, like everyone else, reflect (often or occasionally) on their “moral selves.” My main interest, then, lies not so much in these spheres as such but in the interactions that define their relationships. Religious norms are altered under the influence of shifting political and economic configurations, new religious ideas, and changing physical environments or technological circumstances. This process is accelerated or enforced through violence or coercion (or the threat of such) but more often by law. This relates to the role of the ulama as legal experts but also to that of the state, which, contrary to the Weberian idea regarding its monopoly on violence, derives its power primarily from the administration of law (Cribb 2011, 31). Just like state and religious authorities, ordinary Muslims respond to changing circumstances. Their responses involve a complex of choices and strategies; social, political, and intellectual engagements; and emotions. Let me proceed by working out, in a more concrete form, the nature and implications of these interactions.

As Islam lacks a strong institutional framework for centralizing authority, this study concentrates on the role of religious scholars as the main bearers of normative traditions (Zaman 2002). In the premodern period, the ulama acquired near total control over the canonization and distribution of religious texts, creating “a growing uniformity of Islamic belief and practice throughout the vast area in which Muslims lived” (Bulliet 1994, 21). At the same time, the question of religious authority was always also a question of political authority.
Western imperialism was a particularly challenging condition. Around the turn of the twentieth century, reform-minded ulama throughout the world urged Muslims to modernize themselves, their institutions, and their societies by enhancing their mastery over both secular knowledge (such as natural sciences or language) and religious knowledge, calling for educational institutions to be equipped to offer both. Particularly salient for these reformists was the perceived neglect of the law of God and the perception that Islamic societies indulged in superstitions and detrimental "innovations" (bidah), such as the mystical ideas and practices that implied the possibility of intercession by the deceased between humans and God.

Religious standardization was seen by Islamic reformists as a key element of the advent of a global modernity. The role of an increasingly centralized, uniform, and bureaucratic state was, in this respect, regarded as equally crucial (Bayly 2004, 336–43). In fact, the important shift was not the call for standardization as such, for Islam had been going through a process of homogenization for a much longer period, but the conviction, held by reformist ulama and state agents alike, that religious education should be regarded as an instrument of change (Berkey 2007, 41–49). Through the politics of education, Islam was "objectified" (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 37–45), a process defined by Gregory Starrett (1998, 89) as "the growing consciousness on the part of Muslims that Islam is a coherent system of practices and beliefs, rather than merely an unexamined and unexaminable way of life." Modern states, by privileging standardized systems of religious or secular education over traditional forms of religious learning, accelerated rather than curbed this process.

The reformist movements that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century are often regarded as the root of many contemporary Islamist organizations (see, e.g., Bubalo and Fealy 2005). It is important, however, not to reduce the spirit of reform to political expressions alone and to consider in conjunction changing ideas about the Muslim "self." Concepts of self and individuality are historically contingent and interlinked with religious change (Shulman and Stroumsa 2002). In Islam, mystical concepts and practices in particular have served to investigate inner selves and the relationship between individual Muslims and God (Sviri 2002). The reformist challenge of particular mystical texts and practices involved—besides the struggle over correct interpretations—a fundamental debate about, and reconfiguration of, the Muslim subject. Francis Robinson (1997, 2004, 2008), in his writings on South Asia, argues that the political domination of the Muslim world by non-Muslim forces led to a period of deep reflection among scholars and intellectuals about the meaning of their faith and their place as Muslims in the world at large. As a result, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were marked not only by political upheavals, but also by an "inward turn," contingent on a fundamental shift from an "other-worldly" to a "this-worldly" piety. “While in the past, the reflective believer, the mystic,
might have meditated on the signs of God, the new type of reflective believer reflected on the self and the shortcomings of the self. Now the inner landscape became a crucial site where the battle of the pious for the good took place” (F. Robinson 2008, 273). At the same time, the followers of mystical traditions reinvented themselves and their organizations, in Indonesia and Aceh as much as in other places (Birchok 2015; Hoesterey 2015; Howell 2010; Nur Ichwan 2015; Soeyatno 1977; van Bruinessen and Howell 2007).

Reformist movements—while inspiring the “inward turn”—have incited new discourses of discipline and constraint, often (but not always) by advancing the need to adhere to shariʿa. They have done so in distinct manners. In Indonesia, Muhammadiyah has approached the need to reform Muslim societies by emphasizing (among other things) the “public interest” (maslahah) vested in the ability of individual Muslims to interpret the Qurʾan and the Sunna. Other groups have emphasized, rather, the primacy of Islamic law over human reason (see, e.g., Khoiruddin Nasution 1996). In Southeast Asia, these competing discourses have been adopted in various ways by the secular state (Bowen 2003; Feener 2007, 2013; Liow 2009; Nurlaelawati 2010; Peletz 2002; Salim 2008; Salim and Azra 2003). There is a marked continuity, nonetheless, in the way in which states, from the colonial era up to the present, have come to regard religion as an ordering principle—that is, as a system organizing “the population into manageable and mobilizable units” (Spyer 1996, 192).

Although these observations help us understand how states function and affect human lives, it is important to note that state power (whether discursive, legal, or physical) is never all pervasive (Barker and van Klinken 2009). Refraining from reducing the analysis to the management of Islam by the state alone, in this book I ask how individual Muslims have tried and succeeded in setting limits to this process, either by resisting it or by becoming part of it. In my view, this requires placing the relations among the state, religious authority, and individual agency, explicitly and consistently, within the contours of practice theory.

Islam, I believe, needs to be studied less as a fixed set of ideas and practices and more as a historically contingent process, driven by historically shaped interactions and shifting conceptions of the self. I am inspired, in this regard, by Joel Robbins’s (2004) call, based on his work on Christianity in Papua New Guinea, to combine historical and anthropological methods in order to understand the complex relationship between changing religious ideas and sociopolitical configurations on the one hand, and the shaping of inner religious lives on the other. More generally, I build on what Sherry Ortner (2006, 9) called the historic turn in practice theory, or the observation (based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Marshall Sahlins) that “the playing out of the effects of culturally organized practices is essentially processual and often
very slow.” More specifically, I follow Fredrik Barth (1993, 173), who argued that, to discover patterns of action, it is necessary to “unravel whatever connections and constraints direct the interpretations people make [of events], and thereby give shape to the lives and meanings we are trying to understand.” This book takes Barth’s (1993, 159) conception of an intermediary realm of conscious and reflexive action, located between particular premises (or one’s “cultural stock,” including knowledge, concepts, values, and concerns) and routinized behavior, as a point of departure. Moving beyond Barth, however, I see this realm of action as a space of contestations, revealing itself both through the controlling mechanisms of state and religious authorities and through the intentions, interpretations, and expressions of individuals.

**Ordinary Ethics, Moral Failure, and the Sense of a Life Unfolding**

In his view of orthodoxy, and his influential call to view religion as a “discursive tradition,” Talal Asad (1986) placed the study of religious practice squarely in the domain of power. In my view, this approach holds a risk of overemphasizing practices of (bodily) discipline. I am sympathetic, therefore, to Michael Lambek’s (2000, 312–13) argument that the anthropology of religion cannot simply “rest with power.” As a source and motivation for the shaping of social relations, morality, as the “striving for human good,” represents a “significant third domain alongside power and desire.” These domains are inextricably connected, but not mutually reducible. They may be, to some extent at least, analytically separated. I find useful in particular Lambek’s (2000, 309) contention that morality implies agency, for “contemporary discussions remain merely cynical if they do not delineate the capacity and means for virtuous action as well as the limitations placed upon it.” By this I do not mean to say that power relations are somehow less relevant when it comes to studying religious practices and the formation of religious norms. The relationships at the center of this book are almost always also relationships of power, and the historical and ethnographic material presented in the text that follows contains several examples of the ways in which power works to expand or contract religious agency.

At a more general level, my approach to the concept of ethics draws from Lambek’s (2010b, 1, 10) later work on “ordinary ethics,” which perceives the ethical as both a fundamental “part of the human condition” and a “modality of social action or of being in the world” (see also Das 2012; Lambek 2015). I focus on the second part of this definition. According to Lambek, (ethical) practice must not be conflated with (ethical) action. Whereas practice refers to an ongoing (though continuously changing) process, acts are necessarily “singular” and “irreversible” instances. Acts are performative. They build on
“practical judgment” and, as such, “percolate from or disrupt the stream of practice” (Lambek 2010b, 19). I take inspiration from Lambek’s argument that ethical judgment can be a source of individual agency, while it is always also based—one way or the other—on the application of particular “shared criteria.” This book is a study of the everyday interactions between, on the one hand, the normative forces that claim the authority to formulate criteria for judging “good” and “bad” behavior (and everything in between) and, on the other hand, the individual agency of ordinary Muslims as they act on, respond to, and adapt the religious norms that are based on these criteria.

As I will explain, moreover, in relation to my conceptualization of religious agency, it makes sense to speak not so much of action generally but rather of a particular mode of ethical action, one that is both conscious and reflexive in nature. As Jarrett Zigon (2008) has argued, morality may be viewed as a largely unconscious, habitual domain. Thus he makes an analytical distinction between morality, as denoting a combination of different social-intellectual “spheres,” and ethics, as denoting the reflexive acts through which people “consciously work on themselves” and cultivate the capacity to be moral beings (Zigon 2008, 43; italics in the original). This book builds on Zigon’s work as it investigates the contexts in which ethical reflection takes place and the consequences these reflective engagements have for the religious lives of individuals and the communities of which they are part (see, in particular, Zigon 2009a, b). It analyzes the interactions, processes, and relations through which ordinary Muslims consider, actively and creatively, their social environments and the development of their moral selves. Most importantly, it argues that it is a conscious, reflexive ethical mode that allows individual believers to frame their religious practices and experiences in terms of a personal process of ethical improvement and, on this basis, to engage actively and effectively with the religious norms established by state and religious authorities.

This book is not intended to offer yet another theory of what an “anthropology of ethics” should look like (see, e.g., Faubion 2011; Keane 2015; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2010a, 2015; Zigon 2008). It does, however, take a position in a more specific debate about ethics that has arisen, in recent years, within the anthropology of Islam. My observations in Aceh echo a general trend to study personal piety and religious experiences as a mode of agency. Employing an Asadian framework, which views practices of (self-)discipline as a defining aspect of the formation of religious subjects (Asad 1993), scholars such as Lara Deeb (2006), Charles Hirschkind (2006), Humeira Iqtidar (2011), and Saba Mahmood (2005) have foregrounded pious practices and Islamic “revivalist” organizations and lifestyles as a locus of agency. In recent years, this body of literature has become the subject of critical scrutiny. The emphasis placed on pursuits of pious perfection, it has been argued, wrongly assumes that ethical formation is a coherent and straightforward process. Instead, scholars
such as Magnus Marsden (2005), Samuli Schielke (2010, 2015), and Gregory Simon (2014) have highlighted the ambivalent and unpredictable ways in which ordinary Muslims navigate between religious considerations, on the one hand, and nonreligious concerns, aspirations, and passions, on the other.

Although I share this critical view, I oppose the implicit suggestion that “everyday life” or “lived Islam,” including all possible or associated ambivalences, contradictions, and inconsistencies, precludes a steady and cumulative religious engagement (cf. Fadil and Fernando 2015). One of the main problems is that terms such as tension, contradiction, or moral ambivalence—and, at the level of the individual, the “incoherent” nature of religious selves—have come to function, increasingly, as a kind of final statement when it comes to analyzing the nature of contemporary religion. For example, according to Simon (2014, 15), it is “through grappling with and reflectively attempting to manage tensions—and not simply within the singular lines of discursive logic—that Islamic subjectivity, or moral subjectivity of any kind, emerges in people’s lives.” The moral subjectivities of Egyptian Muslims, writes Samuli Schielke (2015, 23), are contingent on the contradictions and ambivalences caused by the “perfectionist premises” of normative Islam, romantic love, and economic gain, each contributing to the experience of “a life in the future tense where the state that one has reached is never sufficient, where one must always reach for more than one has, a sensibility that is essentially dependent on its being dynamic and growing.” I agree that processes of ethical formation are essentially contingent, fragmented, personal, future-oriented, and intersubjectively constituted. I take issue, however, with the analytical bromide of “unstable selves” (Marsden and Retsikas 2013b, 8) locked in or struck by a condition of insoluble moral tensions and unattainable futures. What I found most striking about the narratives of my interlocutors in Aceh is that, although they were often uncertain, doubtful, or—indeed—ambivalent about the best way to meet a variety of moral and social demands, they also framed their religious lives in terms of a progressive effort, rocky and unpredictable, but seldom in a deadlock.

An important way forward, I propose, is to recognize perceptions of moral failure as a central aspect of ethical formation. As Daan Beekers and I argue in more detail in the introduction of a volume on senses of failure and ethical formation in lived Islam and Christianity (Kloos and Beekers 2018), the tensions between religious and nonreligious concerns, or between pursuits of pious perfection and the ambivalences of everyday life, can best be approached as a dialectic. By this, we mean the possibility that the struggles inherent in everyday life contribute in productive ways to processes of ethical formation. The perceptions of moral failure inherent in these tensions are, in many cases, consciously acted on by individual believers and, as such, can play a central role in these individuals’ attempts to become “good” or “better” Muslims and
Christians. A comprehensive approach toward the religious subject should therefore include both questions about religious commitment and related notions of piety, success, social mobility, transformation, and progress, and questions about its drawbacks, including feelings of shortcoming and stagnation, doubt, religious negligence and sinfulness, and concomitant experiences of stress and disillusion.

Emerging from the ethnography presented in this book is a strong conjunction among failure, ordinary ethics, and life phase. As I will show, the possibility that things might change—even if this is not clearly evident in, or indicated by, the present—can be perceived of as constitutive (and thus not merely a result) of the development of inner religiosities. For my interlocutors in Aceh, perceptions of moral failure depended on “objectified” norms, but also, crucially and simultaneously, on a widely shared conviction that the process of becoming a better Muslim is lifelong, often unpredictable, and full of obstacles and challenges. This conviction turns the sense of a “life long lived”—the awareness that one has (already) changed and that future change is not only possible but also desirable or necessary—into a moral faculty. By focusing on life phase, I do not mean to argue that particular forms and articulations of moral failure—religious negligence, sinning, sudden or prolonged lapses in religious commitment or certainty—are deemed more “acceptable” for people of a particular age or social status (young, old, newlywed, widowed, community leader, socially marginalized figure, and so forth), even if this is also, to some extent at least, the case (cf. Debevec 2012). Rather, my ethnographic material reveals the salience of a specific and widely shared reflexive ethical mode, one that is tied to the sense of a developing life, and that enabled my interlocutors to see their moral shortcomings, under certain conditions, as conducive rather than detrimental to their personal religious development. These connections among failure, life phase, and ethical formation have received very little attention in the anthropology of Islam and religious ethics more generally (cf. Kloos 2018). Explored throughout this book, they inform my understanding of religious agency in crucial ways.

In the past decades, the study of Islam has become increasingly dominated by an emphasis on politics, religious activism, and pietistic movements, and groups and networks engaged in religiously motivated violence or terrorism. In the wake of the global religious resurgence, the acknowledgment that public religion is “here to stay,” and rebuttals of theories about the “failure” of political Islam (see, e.g., Ricklefs 2012, 467–79), a tenacious but also misleading conviction has emerged that Muslim societies and political systems around the world are in the grip of a process of “Islamization” as an all-powerful, pervasive, and coherent force (cf. Peletz 2013 for an important critique). Historians and anthropologists have complicated this view by investigating the varieties among Islamic “currents,” “orientations,” or “world-views,” and by analyzing
the ways in which these differences may be explained by taking into account nonreligious factors such as gender, class, or locality. Although I agree that it makes little sense to study religious expressions without taking into account these different modes of identification, I resist the implication that religious identities somehow develop independently from inner religiosities (that is, as a product of politics, economic relations, or long-standing cultural traditions). This book takes inner Islam seriously as a driver of religious change, a perspective that is at the forefront as I position the project within the existing study of Islam in Aceh and Southeast Asia.

Islam in Aceh as a Subject of Study

A question that has long occupied scholars of Southeast Asia is the relationship between Islam and “indigenous” culture. Islamic conversion in the eastern parts of the Muslim world has often been understood in primarily political and economic terms. The grand narrative is that the religion was able to spread because pre- and early modern states encouraged and facilitated contacts and alliances with the “great” Muslim empires to the west and because Muslim traders dominated the Indian Ocean economic and cultural zone. Until the 1970s, many anthropologists working in Southeast Asia sought to uncover what they regarded to be the “true” cultures underneath the presupposed “veneer” of Islamic practices (Gibson 2000). Interestingly, it seems that Aceh in this scholarly tradition always functioned as a kind of exception that proves the rule. The region has long been presented as a cradle of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. Emphasizing the essential place of Islam in its history and culture, scholars of Aceh have typically asked how religious leaders have tried to make the state more Islamic and how their lay (or “secular”) counterparts have solicited or tried to manage the religious factor as a part of local struggles for power.

A central question, in this regard, concerns the place and significance of the local, partly pre-Islamic customs, traditions, and values that are commonly glossed as *adat*. This term refers to many things. It lays down the rituals that mark important events, such as birth, death, marriage, or the harvest. One of the most commonly practiced rituals is *peusijeuk*, the practice of “cooling down” things that are new and therefore “hot” (such as newborn children, but also, for instance, a new motorcycle). The ways in which rituals like *peusijeuk* are performed (including dress and the use of objects) are place specific. Thus, people might claim that they are unable to say “what is *adat*” in another district, or even a neighboring village. Local leadership is organized, at least partly, on the basis of *adat* institutions, some of which have an Islamic root. *Geuchik*, the address of the village headman (or headwoman), is an *adat* title, just like the village imam (*teungku meunasah*) and the village “council of elders” (*teuha peut*, lit. the “four elders”). *Adat* governs the ways in which conflicts are
solved within communities. Thus, people may argue that it is not necessary to involve state institutions (such as the police or the court) as long as it is possible to deal with a local conflict “by means of adat.”

The few monographs that have taken Acehnese religiosity seriously as a research subject are all concerned, one way or another, with the durability of adat and the transformative power of Islam (Bowen 1993, 2003; Siapno 2002; Siegel 1969; Snouck Hurgronje 1893–94). As I discuss in more detail in the text that follows, particular emphasis is placed in these studies on the gendered aspects of this relationship. While Acehnese society incorporated forms of institutionalized, male-centered Islamic law as early as the sixteenth century, Acehnese conceptions of kinship have a strong matrilocal component. The practice of women inheriting the family house, and of men moving into the houses of their wives after marriage, is still common today. Girls and women remain members of the family core structure. Boys, in contrast, move out of their family home on reaching puberty, after which they develop avoidance relationships with their fathers and their fathers-in-law. Traditionally, they continue their lives by traveling away from their place of birth to look for work, knowledge, and experience. This rite of passage, known as merantau, is crucial in the process of achieving manhood and is dependent on the capacity of women to provide for their own subsistence.6

Closely related to the practice of merantau is the position in Acehnese society of the ulama. When people in Aceh use this term, they may refer to religious teachers generally, the leaders of Islamic boarding schools (dayah or pesantren), professors at the Islamic University in Banda Aceh, or members of the state ulama council (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, MPU). Dependent on the context, they may refer to a more narrow category of ulama dayah, the leaders of traditional Islamic boarding schools, who represent a distinct religious space in Acehnese society, especially in rural areas. A distinction is commonly made between dayah salafiyyah, the schools that operate a primarily religious curriculum based on the study of kitab kuning (classical texts, lit. “yellow books”), and dayah modern (modern dayah) or dayah terpadu (mixed dayah), the schools that are based on a partly religious, partly secular or “state” curriculum.7 The ulama dayah are the leaders of dayah salafiyyah. Although specialists in Islamic law and jurisprudence, they are also commonly recognized as adat leaders—that is, as community leaders with extensive knowledge of local customs and traditions.

According to the Dutch orientalist and government adviser Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, the author of the first major ethnographic study of Aceh, the Acehnese saw Islam and adat as inseparable normative systems. In practice, however, adat often turned out to be the “mistress” and Islamic law “her submissive slave” (Snouck Hurgronje 1893–94, 1:157). According to Snouck Hurgronje, this was due to the fact that, if push came to shove, orthodox Islam
and local traditions constituted opposing and mutually exclusive frameworks of moral and social action. Twentieth-century anthropology treated the subject of Acehnese religiosity in similarly dichotomous terms. More than seventy years after Snouck Hurgronje, James Siegel (1969) focused on the attempts by reformist ulama to modernize religious education and guide Muslims back to the true teachings of Islam. The appeal of this movement, he argued, lay in local perceptions of masculinity. Acehnese men were essentially “guests in their own house” (Siegel 1969, 55; citing Snouck Hurgronje 1893–94, 1:370n1). The scripturalist message of Islamic reformists provided them with a means of escape from their inferior position in society. Jacqueline Siapno, writing in the early 2000s, continued this line of reasoning as she argued that normative Islam represented a male tradition, which, through its “strong attempts at purification,” was fundamentally opposed to the strong position of women in traditional Acehnese society (Siapno 2002, 36–37). Less concerned with gender but equally relevant in this context is John Bowen’s (1993) work on religious practices and traditions in the Gayo highlands. This area, which had maintained complex relations with coastal Acehnese-speaking communities for centuries, was administratively incorporated into Aceh province by the Dutch. Like Siegel, Bowen traced local contestations about proper Islamic ideas and practices back to the historical formation of dichotomous “modernist” and “traditionalist” dispositions.

In line with Snouck Hurgronje’s observations more than a century ago, most Acehnese today reject a sharp division between Islam and adat. They state, for example, that Islam and adat cannot be separated or that adat is in harmony with Islam. Religious teachers are commonly regarded as Islamic leaders (tokoh Islam) and adat leaders (tokoh adat) at the same time. A distinction is made, however, between Islam and adat as sources of legal action. Thus, “adat law” (hukum adat) is seen as something very different from “Islamic law” (hukum syariah) and “state law” (hukum negara)—the first referring to mediation by village leaders and the second and third to formal court procedures—even though there is a certain level of overlap among these domains. It is certainly not my intention, then, to discard these contrasts, which mean something very concrete to the Acehnese. My critique of the literature cited earlier applies to the extent to which it advances a set of relatively static, often stacked dichotomies (Islam–adat, male–female, public–private) as a dominant framework for analyzing the formation of religious subjectivities (cf. Kloos 2016).

To move beyond these dichotomies, I draw from recent developments in the study of Islam in Southeast Asia. It has been forcefully argued, for instance, that processes of religious change and revitalization have been driven by women as much as by men (Aryanti 2013; Blackburn 2008; Künkler and Kloos 2016; Srimulyani 2012; van Doorn-Harder 2006). More generally, the
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The dichotomy between male-centered engagements with Islamic reform and female-centered engagements with local customs and mystical or syncretic traditions has become increasingly untenable (Birchok 2016; Kloos 2016). Earlier, Michael Peletz (1996), in his work on gender representations in Negeri Sembilan (Malaysia), drew attention to the ambivalences inherent in local (Malay) perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Johan Fischer (2008) likewise pointed to the importance of ambivalence, arguing that suburban middle class Malays (both men and women), for the most part unaffiliated with any particular religious or political current or movement, actively select from the discourses of “state” and “public” Islam as they construct opinions; face moral dilemmas; and discard, preserve, or change religious practices. This study elaborates further on the need to transcend the static binaries of tradition versus reform, women versus men, rural versus urban, and adat versus Islam, and to move the study of Islam in Aceh beyond the primacy of the “legal,” the “political,” and the “economic” without negating or underestimating any of these domains (cf. Hoesterey 2015).

Fieldwork

For this book I carried out fieldwork in Aceh for three months in 2008, twelve months in 2009–2010, and during two brief visits in 2012. The first period was mostly an orientation visit, intended to get a feel of the region, which I knew only from my earlier trip in 2006. Most of the ethnographic material was collected at two field sites: an urban, tsunami-affected neighborhood in Banda Aceh and a rural village in Aceh Besar, referred to in this book respectively (and pseudonymically) as Blang Daruet and Jurong. Interviews and conversations took place in Indonesian. The Acehnese, like most other people in Indonesia, do not generally consider this to be their first language; however, most people speak it, and virtually everyone understands. Although I was able to learn some Acehnese, I never succeeded in speaking it fluently. I did obtain a good level of passive understanding, which made it possible to follow conversations that were not explicitly directed at me. Archival data collected in the Netherlands and Indonesia complete the material presented in this study.

In 2008, I lived on the university campus in Darussalam, Banda Aceh, which hosts the Syiah Kuala University (Unsyiah) and the State Islamic Studies Institute (Institut Agama Islam Negeri, IAIN; presently Universitas Islam Negeri, UIN) Ar-Raniry. During this period, I stayed in the house of Professor Darwis Soelaiman, a retired professor of educational sciences, and his wife Mariani. One of my objectives was to familiarize myself with the Acehnese network of religious schools (dayah). Although I do not focus in this book specifically on the dayah setting, it is important to emphasize that these institutions function as an important frame of reference for Acehnese religious life more generally. Differences in
the education system, for instance, reflect the basic doctrinal and sociological differences between the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Assisted by Muhajir al-Fairusy, then an undergraduate student at the IAIN, I visited some twenty dayah in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar. We would usually arrive at these places unannounced, by motorcycle, trying to meet leaders, teachers, students, and villagers. We did not conduct extensive interviews. Although we asked about scholarly networks, curricula, and institutional histories, my primary intention was to observe some of the everyday routines and practices at the dayah. Many young men and women in Aceh, particularly in rural areas, live in a dayah for at least a few years, and religious teachers and students are frequently invited by villagers to perform or assist in basic religious rituals. I therefore look back on these visits as highly formative for my research, even if this is not clearly evident from the ethnographic descriptions presented in this book.

Muhajir’s willingness to be my guide was significant for several reasons. Although a university student, he was highly interested in the dayah curriculum. Once or twice a week he attended lessons at Dayah Darul Ulum, in the village of Ateuk Long Ie (about ten minutes from the university campus), a school founded in 1962 by the venerated ulama Teungku Usman al-Fauzy (d. 1992). He was thus familiar with different forms of religious instruction. Even within Aceh, the world of the dayah is known as insular. As a foreigner and a non-Muslim, it was important to be accompanied on these first, unannounced visits by someone who spoke Acehnese and who was familiar with unwritten rules and codes. Muhajir took great care in explaining to me the importance of introductory rituals, appropriate gifts (such as sugar, or coffee for the students), and, above all, patience. There was also another reason why I was lucky to have him at my side at this early stage of my research. Muhajir is a grandson of Teungku Dahlan al-Fairusy (d. 2007), the former leader of Dayah Tanoh Abee, a well-known and prestigious religious school located in the subdistrict of Seulimeum, Aceh Besar. During our visits to the dayah, Muhajir usually mentioned this pedigree, which is not at all strange or obtrusive in the Acehnese context, where kin and place of descent are the most common ways of introduction. I am sure that this made some of our visits easier, or at least more informal.

One day in November 2008, Muhajir and I visited a school that I refer to in this book as Dayah Darul Hidayah. My first impression of it was colored by amazement. The school, which accommodated hundreds of students, seemed very well taken care of. The largest buildings were multistoried and built of concrete. Most student dwellings were simple, built of brick or wood with thatched roofs, but still better kept than the ones we had seen in other places. Students walked around industriously with brooms and rakes, buckets full of stones and gravel taken from the riverbed, and large bundles of palm leaf. The dayah leaders were absent, so a caretaker told us about the history of the
school, the status of its grounds, and the origins of its students. A week later we returned to meet Abuya, the head of the dayah, who received us in a large, beautifully decorated balai (shelter or place for religious instruction) in front of his house. Afterward, we strolled to the adjacent village to pay a courtesy visit to the geuchik, Ilyas. When he heard about my research, we were invited to join the weekly religious lesson (pengajian), which would take place that same night in the village communal hall (meunasah). We ended up staying overnight, sleeping in the meunasah. A week later I visited again, this time alone. A young man I call Agus invited me to stay at his house. This village was Jurong, and in 2009–2010, Agus’s family, which included his father, Hasyim, and his mother, Adhinda, would become my host family.9

Jurong was part of a cluster of eight villages surrounding a market town just off the main road to Medan. With 115 households and little over 500 inhabitants, it was a community of intermediate size (figure 2). The village itself did not have a mosque. There was one at the market and one at the dayah, both of which were used by villagers for Friday prayers. Jurong was located between the road and the banks of the Aceh River (Krueng Aceh). Most commercial activities took place at the market and on the side of the road. The only businesses in the village itself were a few tiny roadside shops and a coffee shop (kedai). The village was separated from the road by a small rice field (sawah). Another, much larger sawah was located at a twenty minutes’ walk, on the other side of the river, accessible via a pedestrian bridge. Besides the river and the sawah, the community bordered on the walled dayah compound and a complex of gardens (mostly coconut, vegetables, pepper, and banana).

Inhabitants of Jurong generally described their village as poor, explaining that most of them were farmers and that few actually owned the land on which they worked. Only ten households owned sawah land, Agus’s family being one of them. Although 80 percent of the population were officially registered as farmers (petani), few people lived exclusively off the land. Most were also active in construction, transport, petty trade, odd labor, or, in the case of women, home industries. Seven people were officially registered as traders. Twelve households lived on civil servant salaries. A list of “poor people” (fakir-miskin), drafted by the village administration a few years earlier by order of the subdistrict (kecamatan), counted fifty-nine families. Overall, the people of Jurong were not very highly educated. Most of them had only finished primary school or junior high school. Of the adolescents and young adults, the percentage attending senior high school or vocational training was higher. In 2009, six people studied at an institution of higher education.

When I came to Aceh in October 2009 for a full year of fieldwork, my plan was to stay for a few days with my friend Nurdin, look for a place to live in a Banda Aceh neighborhood, and start my research there. I would then
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go back to Jurong and decide whether it was possible to conduct research in both places. Eventually I decided to stay in Nurdin’s *kampung*, Blang Daruet. I rented a house in the compound of an elderly couple. Yusuf was originally from Daruet. He had worked most of his life in the cement factory in Lhoknga, located near Banda Aceh on the West Coast. After his retirement he had started a business of his own in the transport sector. His wife, Mila, was a nurse in Banda Aceh’s main hospital. Yusuf and Mila belonged to one of the few wealthy families in Daruet. They had a good name. Yusuf made a point of hiring people from the neighborhood and invested considerable sums of money in communal facilities, such as the Daruet mosque. My house was separated from their own (much larger) residence. While Yusuf and Mila took very good care of me, our relationship was that of tenant and landlord and thus different from the more personal relationship I had with my host family in Jurong. I did, however, develop close relationships with some other families in the neighborhood, who were mixed in terms of their economic situation. Besides being my most regular interlocutors in Blang Daruet, they would ask me to join them on family visits and trips to local fairs, festivals, or the beach.

Desa Blang Daruet is relatively close to the sea and stood no chance when the tsunami smashed into the city on December 26, 2004. The neighborhood was completely destroyed. Apart from a few larger buildings, everything
(mainly houses and shops, but also warehouses) was razed to the ground. In the mayhem, a staggering total of 75 percent of about 3,000 inhabitants died. In the following years, Blang Daruet was physically reconstructed with the help of two international NGOs. When I first arrived, almost all survivors had been given a house to live in. Yusuf and Mila were among the very few who were able to reconstruct their house. The large majority of villagers lived in so-called *rumah tsunami*, concrete houses comprising three rooms (a sitting room and two bedrooms), a miniature bathroom, and a kitchenette (most “tsunami houses” in Banda Aceh look roughly like this) (figure 3). My own house was also a tsunami house. It had been granted to Yusuf and Mila before they rebuilt their own house. In 2009, the neighborhood consisted of 1,325 inhabitants, including many newcomers.

Once, Blang Daruet belonged to a cluster of villages situated between Banda Aceh and the coast. In 2009, it was an integrated part of the urban conglomeration. Like Jurong, it was not a wealthy community. According to the *kampung* secretary’s calculations, it had a poverty rate of around 50 percent. By far the largest part of the working population was registered as skilled or unskilled laborers (*buruh*), artisans/craftsmen (*tukang*), and traders (*pedagang*). About a hundred people worked in the private sector (*swasta*), and thirty-three people were registered as civil servants (Pegawai Negeri Sipil, PNS). The bulk
of economic activity took place on a reconstructed main road that cut across the neighborhood. On one side there was the neighborhood mosque, which was also the geographic center of the original settlement. Before the tsunami this area had been very populous. In 2009, it was still more densely built than the area on the other side of the road, which, not so long ago, was mostly sawah land. My house was located in this “new” part of the neighborhood.

Overall, my decision to conduct research in Jurong and Blang Daruet worked out well. I enjoyed the close relationship with my host family in Jurong, but it was also pleasant to return regularly to my more independent life in Banda Aceh. My official residence was Daruet, where I registered as a inhabitant. As a result, I was always a visitor in Jurong, regardless of the length of my stay. After a while, I established a rhythm in traveling back and forth. Usually I spent between ten days and two weeks in Jurong. The periods in Banda Aceh were somewhat longer, usually between two and three weeks, not because I needed more time for my research in Daruet, but because other activities—interviews, university meetings, formalities—kept me in the city longer. In contrast to Jurong, Daruet had its own office for village administration and its own mosque, both of which were good places to meet people and talk about current issues. On the other hand, Jurong was smaller and more separated from neighboring communities because of the physical boundaries formed by rice fields, gardens, the dayah, and the river. Thus it was generally easier to find out what was “going on” in Jurong than in Daruet, certainly in the beginning. One of the major disadvantages of the choice to divide my time was the fact that I sometimes missed important events or developments, simply because I was not there. In such cases, I tried to find out as much as possible afterward from the people who were directly involved. Of course, the information I gathered in this way could never match direct observation.

A brief closing remark about my position as a non-Muslim and a Dutch national is in place. Like other personal traits, such as my age, gender, and education, these identities influenced my daily interactions. People often told me, especially at first meetings, about the inherent beauty of Islam. This was prompted, at least in part, by a perceived need to counter mistaken “Western” images of Islam as an intolerant or even violent religion. As we came to know each other better, my interlocutors expressed their hope that, at some point in the future, I would decide to become a Muslim. I never experienced brash attempts at conversion. In rare instances, my identity as a non-Muslim became a source of tension. For example, a man I had not met before once told me that, as a non-Muslim, I should leave the Daruet mosque during Friday prayers. I explained that the leadership of the mosque had granted me permission to attend and listen to the sermon. In fact, I was more than happy to leave in order to prevent a conflict, but before I could make this clear, some of my local acquaintances interfered and told the man—who neither came from nor lived
in Blang Daruet—that my presence was none of his business. The discussion became rather heated but was also quickly solved when I said that I would sit at the back, near the exit. My identity as a Dutch researcher was a topic of occasional questions and conversations about the colonial past, as well as jokes that I had come to try and “colonize Aceh again” (which made me feel awkward, but not attacked). As Anton Stolwijk (2016) has shown, memories of the war against the Dutch are still very much present in contemporary Acehnese society, often in surprising ways. My research did not focus on the remnants of the war, however, and people rarely brought it up. As my relationship with my interlocutors deepened, both my Dutch nationality and my identity as a non-Muslim became less and less prominent as a topic of discussion.

Organization of the Book

The first two chapters of this book focus on the impact of Islamic reformism on Acehnese society, from the late colonial period until the early 1970s. They are based on different types of sources. Chapter 1 is based entirely on library sources and materials collected in the colonial archives in Leiden, The Hague, and Jakarta. Chapter 2 is based partly on archival sources (including documents from the provincial archive in Banda Aceh) and partly on the field notes of Chandra Jayawardena (d. 1981), an anthropologist who conducted extensive fieldwork in the subdistrict of Indrapuri, Aceh Besar, in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 each show a different but crucial aspect of the constitution of religious agency in contemporary Aceh: respectively, the transformation of traditional religious authority, flexible engagements with normative Islam, and self-perceived moral failure as a part of individual projects of ethical improvement. These three chapters are based almost entirely on my own ethnographic fieldwork. Before I proceed, let me briefly outline the individual chapters and their contribution to the argument.

Chapter 1 discusses the main political, economic, and religious forces that have shaped Acehnese history. It describes the heyday of the Acehnese sultanate around the turn of the seventeenth century, the subsequent decline of royal power, and the emergence in rural areas of religious experts (the ulama) as a new and influential social group. The chapter then investigates the role of colonialism in the imagining of Aceh as a particularly “pious” place. In the twentieth century, agents of the colonial state and Islamic leaders converged in their tendency to frame religious identity and pious expressions in scripturalist (rather than, for example, pluralist or syncretistic) terms. The resulting discourse of Acehnese exceptionalism was reproduced and reconfigured in the period of Indonesian independence, influencing in complex ways the interactions between state and religious authorities on the one hand, and the majority of lay Muslims on the other.
Chapter 2 focuses on Aceh Besar, more specifically the subdistrict of Indrapuri, which is known historically as a hotbed of reformist and militant Islam. On the basis of an analysis of archival sources and the field notes of the late Chandra Jayawardena, I show that although Islamic scripturalism was attractive as a political currency in the mid-twentieth century, its impact on Acehnese religious life was actually limited. Under the influence of the state asserting itself more strongly at the village level, religious and political authority became increasingly intertwined. Ordinary villagers complicated this process by appropriating the expressions of formalized religious authority to address their own religious and nonreligious concerns.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the theme of state assertion by analyzing a conflict between ordinary villagers and the leaders of Dayah Darul Hidayah. Rooted in a deeply seated contestation about power and resources, it reveals a fundamental, for a large part generational, difference in ideas about moral leadership. The chapter shows that young adults are prepared, much more than their elders, to view traditional institutions such as the village and Islamic boarding schools as part of the state. This difference connects to an important historical shift, as young people have become increasingly pragmatic consumers of religious authority without abandoning or deeming irrelevant traditional institutions.

Chapter 4 returns to the question of Acehnese exceptionalism. Shifting the view to Blang Daruet, it places the study of Aceh squarely in debates about the global Islamic resurgence. The chapter describes how a young man, feeling attracted to the forces of global Islamism, adopted a strongly “outward” pious lifestyle. In the wake of the destruction caused by the 2004 tsunami, his behavior was accommodated, rather than categorically resisted or rejected, by his family. Drawing on the concept of moral ambivalence, and focusing in particular on the stances, practices, and narratives of his parents, I demonstrate how, within a single family and in the context of a neighborhood being reinvented after the disaster, religious practices and experiences were connected in different ways to contested concepts of kinship, community, money, social security, and class.

Chapter 5 further develops the concept of religious agency. It explores the ways in which ordinary Acehnese Muslims deal, in thought and action, with the problem of sinning. While sinfulness seems to be primarily a matter of discipline, this chapter shows that even the basic concern of dealing with bad behavior is marked by considerable measures of flexibility and creativity. This is important, because it influences the ways in which ordinary people approach and respond to the legalistic moral frameworks formulated by the state, most notably through the recent implementation of shari'a law. This chapter elaborates in particular on experiences associated with specific life stages, and the question of how these experiences enable ordinary Acehnese Muslims to build on self-perceived moral failure—sinning, in this case—as they work, assertively...
and creatively, on their ethical selves. It demonstrates how, rather than simply rejecting or adopting state and public discourses, ordinary Acehnese actively select and appropriate officialized discourses of ethical improvement when they make moral decisions, approach dilemmas, and justify behavior, acts that are part and parcel of the process of becoming better Muslims.