

## Dance as Cultural Practice vs. Religious Piety: Acehese Dance in Banda Aceh and Yogyakarta

Maho A. Ishiguro

### Introduction

*Why do they all want to ask us about the relationship between Acehese arts and religion? Actually, there are no Islamic aspects in the dance itself. Yes, the song lyrics do pronounce the names of Allah and Prophet Muhammad, but these songs have been simply passed down for generations. We don't sing them particularly as a religious practice.*  
—Acehese dancers on tour in New England, February 2015<sup>1</sup>

*While we do not quite understand Acehese, we can hear that the lyrics of the songs mention the name of Prophet Muhammad as well as Islamic greetings. Also, dances which are in the sitting position, remind us of dhikr. Through practicing Acehese performing arts, we deepen our piety and feel closer to God.*—Muhammad, Yogyakarta, May 2016

The quotations above illustrate contrasting meanings of Acehese music and dance to two different sets of practitioners in Indonesia. The Acehese practitioners deny that their practice of music and dance is a vehicle to express their religiosity; instead, they emphasize the tradition and cultural aspects imbedded in their practice. In contrast, Javanese practitioners view Acehese music and dance as a means to deepen their Islamic faith. The religious meanings they observe here lead them to choose Aceh's performing arts over their own Javanese performing arts.

In this article, I examine how practitioners of Acehese music and dance in the two Indonesian cities of Banda Aceh and Yogyakarta use contrasting strategies to legitimize their own participation in the performing arts. I illustrate that these strategies are necessitated through recent changes in the socio-cultural and religious climate in Indonesia, particularly in these two cities. More specifically, Islam in

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An ethnomusicologist whose research focuses on dance and music of Indonesia, **Maho A. Ishiguro** uses dance as a lens for studying and engaging with Indonesian people, cultural practices, and living traditions. Ishiguro began her study of Indonesian performing arts at Wesleyan University under the tutelage of Sumarsam and I. M. Harjito. Her doctoral research, conducted under the auspices of a Fulbright-Hays DDRA Fellowship, took her to Indonesia's westernmost Aceh province. Ishiguro holds a PhD and an MA in Ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University (2018). She is a strong exponent of pedagogical techniques that employ both scholarly engagement and praxis within the performing arts. Ishiguro is assistant professor of ethnomusicology at Emory University.

Yogyakarta has drifted away from a historically syncretic, localized form and toward a more conservative form. This shift has impacted Yogyakarta's Muslim youth's views on what kind of arts they deem appropriate to take part in, especially as these practitioners seek to maintain their religious identity and practice religious principles to be connected to a modern, reformist, and global Islam. In Banda Aceh, the post-tsunami period (2004–present) sees religious leaders' contestations toward the performing arts becoming part of the province's administrative system, posing new challenges and risks that performing arts practitioners face today. To navigate through this complex sociocultural, political, and religious landscape, these Acehese practitioners respond creatively and strategize wisely.

## **Situating This Study: Women's Performing Arts, Islam, and Indonesia**

This article is a case study on discourses about (a) the rapidly changing sociocultural and religious climate in Indonesia; (b) the impact of the global Islamic revival on the performing arts; and (c) women's cultural and artistic expressions in the context of Muslim society. Recent shifts in religious climate have resulted in certain arts flourishing as others are prohibited in Islamic societies (Baily 2001; Raudvere 2002; Weintraub 2008). Indonesia's performing arts, in particular, have seen many recent evolutions in reaction to social, religious, and political demands (Lindsay 1995; Harnish 2006; Sunardi 2011; Yampolsky 1995). In this article, I observe how dancers in the Yogyakarta and Aceh regions negotiate their practices under the changing regulations and authority of local Islamic organizations and their own religious morality today.

Furthermore, I expand upon literature that examines women's expressions of piety within Muslim contexts. Such discourses have shown how women's participation in Islamic practices (e.g., mosque attendance and Quranic arts) has been in constant flux over the past few decades in many parts of the world (Furseth 2011; Mahmood 2005; Rasmussen 2010). Several scholars have discussed that Indonesian women have been active participants in practicing piety and engaging in discourses about morality, Islamic identity, education, and gender equality, especially in the two decades since the end of President Suharto's regime (Harvey 2011; Smith-Hefner 2019; Srimulyani 2011; Zamhari 2011). Within these unique political circumstances, I analyze how the rise of conservative Islam in Indonesia, particularly in Banda Aceh and Yogyakarta, has impacted women's engagement in the performing arts.

Scholarly research on Aceh's performing arts was limited until the 2000s, largely due to the tense relationship between the province of Aceh and the Indonesian central government. Especially in the field of ethnomusicology and in academic publications, an Australian ethnomusicologist, Margaret Kartomi, has single-handedly introduced Acehese performing arts over the preceding decades (Kartomi 2005, 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2014). Since the 2005 resolution of the political conflict, more scholars have written about the historical construction of Acehese identity as an Islamic state, the ulama's changing position in Acehese society, and the effects of sharia on the everyday lives of Muslims (Aspinall 2009; Reid 2006; Kloos 2018). More generally, many scholarly works have examined Indonesian Islam's past and present political environments, changes in state ideology, and the impact of the global Islamic revival (Baswedan 2004; Hefner 2000; Hosen 2005; van Bruinessen 2013). I aim to contribute to these discourses by contextualizing my research on Acehese performing arts within the contemporary sociocultural conditions the practitioners in Yogyakarta and Banda Aceh experience today.

## **Sociocultural, Historical, and Religious Landscape**

### **Banda Aceh**

Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh province, has been historically a bustling city of trade, connecting traders from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent. Banda Aceh is also



Photo 1. Locations of Banda Aceh and Yogyakarta. Image by the author.

known as the verandah of Mecca, as it was the port of departure for Muslim Southeast Asians making pilgrimage to Mecca. At the height of its flourishing in the seventeenth century under Sultan Iskandar Muda, Banda Aceh was known as an Islamic center of Southeast Asia, attracting many Muslim scholars and leaders (Kloos 2018). Furthermore, Banda Aceh has long self-identified as part of the Muslim network, connecting Aceh to the Mughal and Ottoman Empires, rather than belonging to today's Indonesian archipelago (Riddell 2006). However, since the end of World War II, when Indonesia was formed as a nation-state with a secular constitution, Aceh has been occupied in an ideological conflict with the central government, which broke its original promise to establish Islamic religious principles as the backbone of the newly minted nation's constitution (Aspinall 2009). This escalated in the 1970s, due to the unfair share of profit from Aceh's natural resources, and the separatist movement Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), which rose up in the province during the same time (Miller 2006).

In 2004, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami swept away much of Banda Aceh. The disaster led to vast socioreligious and political change in the region. First, the separatist movement surrendered, and the central government renewed the political and cultural autonomy of Aceh, expanding the province's right to practice partial sharia law, along with the creation of sharia courts and sharia police (Miller 2006). Furthermore, Acehnese society developed a sense of religious reawakening in the post-tsunami period. In making sense of the sudden and great loss of life, the Acehnese came to view the natural disaster as a punishment from Allah for straying from Muslim ways of living (Ishiguro 2019a; Kloos 2018). Today, Islam is not only applied to religious practices of individuals, but also as part of the administrative and legal systems in the Aceh province.

Indonesians describe the form of Islam practiced in Aceh as *kuat* (strong). After living in five Indonesian cities, I began to understand what a strong Islamic practice means in the everyday lives of the Acehnese. *Jumatan* is a Friday midday prayer, which requires Acehnese men to attend *masjid*. In Banda Aceh, about thirty minutes before *jumatan*, every major road empties and shops are closed. Instead, *masjid* are packed with men clad in *sarong*. The omnipresence of Islam stimulates not only the visual senses but also the auditory senses: layers and layers of the sounds of *azan* and *shalawat* converge from all angles five times a day, a profound experience, even for a non-Muslim person such as myself. The *sholat*, one of the five pillars of Islam that occurs five times daily, is a significant part of the lives of the Acehnese. Furthermore, they use the names of *sholat* to express a sense of time. For example, my friend would say, "Let's meet after *zuhur* tomorrow for a practice session." This anecdote illustrates how deeply Islamic practices are integrated into the everyday lives of the Acehnese.



Photo 2. Masjid Baiturrahman, the main mosque in the city of Banda Aceh. Photograph by the author. Banda Aceh, December 2013.

Photo 3. Mosque in a Central Javanese architectural style. Photograph by Darsono, Yogyakarta, December 2015.



## Yogyakarta

The second site of my research is Yogyakarta. It is one of the Javanese court cities which played a significant role in supporting Javanese traditional arts, and Yogyakarta's people take pride in their cultural practices and historical roots (Hughes-Freeland 2011). Yogyakarta's Islamic practices have been historically syncretic. Islam entered Java through family ties with powerful merchants in the northern coast, which engaged with the greater Indian Ocean realm through sea trades. By the seventeenth century, Islam had penetrated the interior of central Java, where Hindu-Buddhist cultures had previously been deeply rooted (Koentjaraningrat 1990). The collapse of Majapahit, Java's last Hindu-Buddhist kingdom, to the Demak Islamic Sultanate in the sixteenth century sped up the progress of conversion among the Javanese population (Smith-Hefner 2019). Today, *kraton*, where the Sultan resides, is the mystical center, filled with symbolism that expresses syncretic notions of the relationship between people, Islam, and Javanese traditions (Woodward 1991). Java's syncretic type of Islam is known as *Agami Jawi*, in which Hindu-Buddhist beliefs as well

as indigenous animism and *adat* (traditional customs, including rituals, ancestral worship, ceremonies, literatures, and practices surrounding mysticism, folk beliefs, and royal courts) are reinterpreted and integrated in varieties of ways into an Islamic frame of reference (Hughes-Freeland 2008; Koentjaraningrat 1990; Smith-Hefner 2019).

Although *Agami Jawi* became rooted deeply in Yogyakarta, modern-reformist Islam also attained a foothold in the late nineteenth century. Muhammadiyah, the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, was heavily influenced by the ideas of reformist Muhammad Abduh, an Egyptian scholar of Islamic modernism (Koentjaraningrat 1990). Established in 1912 in Yogyakarta with the goal of promoting modern Islamic reform, Muhammadiyah integrated modern technologies into their activities of dissemination and developed an extensive network through schools and associations. Since the era of Reformasi (1998–present), Muhammadiyah has had both liberal progressive members and conservative fundamentalist members.<sup>2</sup> However, Martin van Bruinessen (2011) argues that in recent decades, the balance between the two parties within Muhammadiyah has shifted toward conservative fundamentalism. Muhammadiyah, among various coalitions of Muslim university students of Indonesia, such as Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI; Association of Muslim University Students), Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah (IMM; League of Muhammadiyah University Students), and Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia (KAMMI; United Action of Indonesian Muslim Students), has put strong emphasis on education and ethics standards of young Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, today's reformist Islam has significantly impacted the social and religious lives of the youth—the main practicing bodies of Acehese dance in this city.

## Acehese Music and Dance

In comparison to Central Javanese court dance and *gamelan* music, which have received significant attention because they were frequently performed on global stages in past decades, Acehese music and dance are much less well-known outside of Aceh. Below is a brief introduction to Acehese music and dance.

There are three signature elements in traditional Acehese music and dance. First, Acehese music and dance commonly involve group performances, and the group dynamic is highly woven into artistic practice. For example, an ensemble of *rapai* Acehese frame drum employs an intricate interlocking style of strokes. This interlocking style layers complex rhythms among the whole ensemble, making the sound of *rapai* ensembles elaborate and unique. This complexity carries over to a number of dances that take advantage of the multiplicity of bodies. The movements of each individual dancer, particularly in sitting dances, such as ratoeh duek and rateb meuseukat, are quite simple, as sitting dance typically involve only upper torso movements, including the use of hands, shoulders, heads, and chest, while the dancers sit on their heels. However, when coordinated in quick tempi with several dancing bodies all sitting in one line, the dance becomes mesmerizing, bearing visual complexities. Finally, as many dance forms in Aceh use body percussion (by clapping hands and hitting thighs, chests, and shoulders with hands), having a group of dancers is essential to creating a remarkable auditory effect. Tightly sitting next to one another, moving together in a meticulously synchronized and coordinated choreography, and creating what sounds like sounds of crashing waves with their body percussions, the dancers become a single entity that is much more profound than a group of individual dancers.

Second, Acehese music and dance is gendered, meaning that, although both male and female are involved in the arts, certain repertoires are assigned to a specific gender. For example, a standing dance, *seudati*, is considered a dance form exclusively appropriate for male practitioners as it involves quick and aggressive movements and slapping the abdomen with force. The female counterpart to this standing dance is *laweut*, which employs softer and slower movements and is



*Photo 4. Bur'am, an ensemble of rapai frame drum from Banda Aceh. Rapai is commonly played in a group, allowing a complex interlocking style of strokes among the musicians. Photograph by the author. Banda Aceh, September 2015.*

*Photo 5. One of the Acehnese sitting dances, ratoeh duek, is performed by a group of dancers. Photograph by Sandy Aldieri, Perceptions Photography, courtesy of the Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, March 2015.*



considered more appropriate for female expressions. Moreover, in laweut, female dancers slap their thighs instead of abdomens as it is believed that slapping the area of the lower torso would damage female reproductive organs. Furthermore, there are, in some exceptional cases,

sitting dance repertoires, such as ratoeh duek, which are performed by both male and female practitioners. However, male and female practitioners never practice ratoeh duek together, despite the fact that they share most of the movements. Although men and women do not dance together in order to avoid any physical contact, they may share the stage together. In today's performing arts scenes, *sanggar* in Aceh are filled with young women and men, most of them being college students.<sup>4</sup>

The third signature element in traditional Acehnese music and dance is its engagement with Islam. Margaret Kartomi coined the term “dance-song” to describe the dynamic in these Acehnese repertoires (Kartomi 2011) because dancers often act as musicians, singing the accompaniment songs as well as creating rhythmic elements through body percussion throughout the choreography. A medley of short songs, which accompany dances, typically originate in *shalawat* (songs in praise of the Prophet Muhammad) and traditional Acehnese songs. Kartomi discusses that Aceh's traditional dance and songs practiced today are believed to have developed from localized forms of *dakwah* and *dhikr* (2012). *Dakwah* refers to the act of proselytization of Islam, which frequently employs the performing arts as a method to spread religious teachings. The purpose of *dhikr* is spiritual enrichment and deepening of piety, which brings worshippers closer to Allah. Having its roots in Sufi practices, *dhikr* uses repeated movements, chanting the names of Allah, and breathing techniques to bring practitioners to a meditative mental state. Today, Acehnese music and dance with religious texts, including the confession of faith, are considered “art with Islamic themes”; when secular texts are used in Acehnese music and dance, it is considered “art with Islamic flavor” (Kartomi 2011).

## Popularization of Acehnese Music and Dance in Yogyakarta

Although the circulation of the Acehnese performing arts among young Yogyanese students is a relatively new scene, Yogyakarta has seen an Acehnese community in the city for several decades. Marzuki Hasan, a professor of performing arts specializing in Acehnese music and dance at the Institute Kesenian Jakarta (Art Institute of Jakarta), recalled that during his graduate studies at Gadjah Mada University (UGM) in Yogyakarta in the 1960s, there was a group of Acehnese dancers who gathered regularly to practice *seudati* (Marzuki Hasan, personal communication, January 2016). As Acehnese people *meurantau*, a tradition in which men leave home to earn a living and send resources to their families, it is not surprising to find an Acehnese population in Yogyakarta that goes back some generations. There are a number of *Asrama Aceh*, housing complexes where Acehnese people gather, in many parts of Yogyakarta. Recently, several Acehnese restaurants have popped up in the city; they are not only enjoyed by the local Acehnese population, but have also attracted the Yogyanese youth.

## Two *Sanggar* in Yogyakarta: Rampoe UGM and Saka UGM

In this section, I introduce two Yogyanese *sanggar* (art communities), Rampoe UGM and *Sanggar Kesenian Aceh UGM* (known as Saka), in order to provide an ethnographic account of how Acehnese performing arts are practiced in Yogyakarta today.

### Rampoe UGM

Rampoe UGM was founded in 2009 by a group of Acehnese students who majored in Arabic literature at UGM. At the time of its founding, Rampoe UGM consisted of both Acehnese and non-Acehnese students who got together after class to casually practice dance. The Acehnese members knew several sitting dances such as *saman gayo* and *likok pulo*. In 2010, Rampoe UGM was officially recognized by UGM as a *sanggar*, allowing them to apply for financial supports from the university (Rampoe UGM, personal communication with author, May–July 2016). Rampoe UGM has grown in membership over the last decade. In 2016, over 200 students applied to join



Photo 6. A practice scene from Rampoe UGM. Female dance practitioners who are learning the choreography form two lines while the senior dancers sit in front to demonstrate the movements, with one senior male musician who accompanies by playing the rapai and singing. Photograph by the author. Yogyakarta, May 2016.

Photo 7. A practice scene from Rampoe UGM. Two groups of male dancers practice saman dance from Gayo Lues, Aceh province. One senior member faces and teaches the younger dancers. Photograph by the author. Yogyakarta, July 2016.



the group each year, and the membership was around 150. Although a high percentage of members are from Central Java, there is also a significant portion of members from south Sumatra and East Java.

Routine practices are held twice per week in a large hallway; female and male members share the practice time and space, but practice separately. There is no Acehnese practitioner who teaches the material and technique. Rather, senior members who have been practicing music and dance teach younger students. One of the practice sessions I attended involved about sixty female members who made two lines facing each other to practice ratoeh duek. The session was supervised by four older members who sat in between the two lines to demonstrate the movements. Although those who teach music and dance are mostly non-Acehnese who learned Acehnese performing arts in Yogyakarta, there was one Acehnese man who observed their practice sessions and offered last-minute tune-ups before Rampoe UGM's performances. Rampoe UGM also hold social events in order to create a sense of community among the members. During the month of Ramadhan, members periodically meet for breaking of the fast and hold *Halal-bin-Halal*, gatherings at which they share meals together. Rampoe UGM also has an outreach program for teaching Acehnese dance to local K–12 schools.

### Saka

Saka UGM was founded in 2011 by three students majoring in Arabic literature in the Department of Cultural Studies. Two of these students were originally from Aceh and moved to Yogyakarta to attend UGM. Annually, the *sanggar* accepts fifty new members and there are about two hundred members in the *sanggar*, consisting of current students and alumni. Today, a very small percentage of the members are from Aceh (Evita and Aulia, personal communication with author, July 2016). The activities at Saka, weekly routine practices and social events, are similar to Rampoe UGM. However, female and male members have separate practice times. It is only at social events and performances that male and female members interact with one another. At performances, Saka frequently invites Acehnese musicians to accompany their dances at events. In doing so, Saka provides a monetary opportunity for local Acehnese practitioners. Saka performs for events such as the opening of seminars, conferences, competitions, and events on campus at UGM, another aspect shared by both Rampoe UGM and Saka.

In prior research (Ishiguro 2019b) I examined the explosive popularization of ratoeh jaroe, a new dance form based on traditional Acehnese sitting dances in Jakarta, the capital of the nation. Ratoeh jaroe began to receive attention in Jakarta in 2005 after Aceh experienced a devastating natural disaster that took many lives in coastal Aceh. Since then, its growing popularity has not declined until today, resulting in a spectacular performance of ratoeh jaroe by 1,600 high school dancers at the opening ceremony of Asian Games in 2018 in Jakarta. Practitioners of ratoeh jaroe were mostly high school students and almost always exclusively female. At this location, there was a network of ethnically Acehnese dance teachers who migrated from Banda Aceh to Jakarta to teach this popular form of Acehnese dance. These Acehnese teachers dominated the ratoeh jaroe scene as the authorities of the dance form, organizers and judges of competitions, creators of new movements and songs, and teachers to the large population of high school girls.

In Yogyakarta, however, the conditions are different: the majority of Acehnese music and dance practitioners are college students, consisting of both women and men. Although there is a small number of ethnically Acehnese art practitioners who are in Yogyakarta to further their education in the graduate program at the Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) and other universities, at the time of my fieldwork in 2016 they did not form a network of Acehnese teachers as I saw in Jakarta. Rather, those who run the scene in Yogyakarta are non-Acehnese college students who have been involved in Acehnese music and dance for a handful of years. In particular, as the *sanggar* grew in their scale and membership, ethnically Acehnese practitioners' involvement was minimized to last-minute brushups before competitions. I met with one of the Acehnese students at ISI who

had been an active musician at a *sanggar* in Banda Aceh, prior to his arrival at Yogyakarta. He commented on how the Yogyanese *sanggar* have their own way of operating their groups, different from what he was used to in Banda Aceh. Although he was often asked to play for performances by these *sanggar*, his expertise and authority was not sought out by the Yogyanese practitioners in the ways that he would have experienced in Jakarta (Rudi Asman, personal communication with the author, May 2016).

## Voices from the Field

Interviews with dancers and musicians from these *sanggar* at Yogyakarta revealed intriguing individual and collective experiences of practicing Acehese arts—art forms of ethnic Others. Here, I present snapshots of the five practitioners to articulate their insights about the engagement between Islam and their artistic endeavors, and how they navigate today's changing religious landscape in Yogyakarta. Three specific issues I discuss here are (a) expressions of religious identities through Acehese music and dance, (b) arts as a vehicle of deepening piety, and (c) traditional Javanese mysticism versus modern-reformist Islam.

## Religious Identity through Acehese Music and Dance

The use of head covers by Muslim women in recent decades has been a hotbed of discussion in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies, as well as in academia (Ahmed 2011; Brenner 1996; Furseth 2011; Jansen 1998; MacLeod 1992; Smith-Hefner 2007). The central debate has been on what the head cover means to Muslim women. The discourse is complex: some argue that it frees Muslim women from the unsolicited male gaze, increases women's mobility and opportunities to engage with public life, and allows women to express modernity outside of Western terms. In Yogyakarta's Acehese music and dance community, young female dancers contribute to this global discourse on using head covers as part of their religious identity.

Evita and Yuna from Saka UGM shared stories regarding their use of head covers and experiences in dance. Native of Jakarta, they studied Javanese dance since they were in elementary school and had intended to continue studying it. However, when they signed up for an audition at a Javanese dance *sanggar* at their university, the members of the *sanggar* asked a daunting question: Are you willing to take off your head cover for rehearsals and performances? Both commented that taking off the head cover in public as they became older began to feel problematic, causing them to leave Javanese dance. In particular, Evita says of her experience, "First, I just enrolled in Javanese dance to see how I feel [about practicing without wearing the *jilbab* (head cover)]... But, my goodness, it broke my heart [to take off my *jilbab*!] Then, I saw a poster of Acehese dance group and women were wearing *jilbab*. So, I thought, let's try this [Acehese dance]" (Evita and Yuna, personal communication, July 2016).

In Acehese dance, covering female dancers' hair is required, as it serves as a way to respect Aceh's culture and history that are tightly intertwined with Islam. In both traditional and contemporary dance, female dancers cover their skin and the curves of their bodies by wearing loose, long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and a *songket* (a piece of cloth that goes around their lower bodies, hitting below the knees). On the other hand, Javanese court dance costumes are much more revealing of women's body lines and skin. Depending on the dance forms and their various origins, the costumes only use a cloth or a velvet jerkin to cover the torso, leaving dancers' arms and, sometimes, shoulders completely revealed. Their hair is typically up, baring much of the neckline. In my personal experience of performing Javanese court dance after several months of practicing Acehese dance in full costumes, I felt much more exposed in the former.

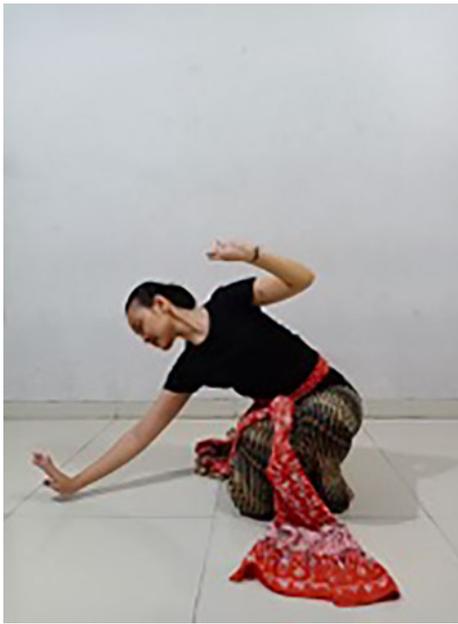


Photo 8. A photo of a Javanese court dance movement, called *nyalang*, in which female dancers extensively contort their torsos, floating over the floor in a circular motion while extending their right hand horizontally. Photograph by Sonia Pangesti Lambangsari and Muhammad Nur Aziz. Surakarta, May 2022.



Photo 9. A photo of a Javanese court dance movement, called *mlaku telu*, in which a female dancer holds and lifts up the edge of her sarong as she takes steps, revealing her ankles and possibly calves. Photograph by Sonia Pangesti Lambangsari and Muhammad Nur Aziz. Surakarta, May 2022.

chest completely. Some also used black cloth to cover their hair under the elaborate head ornamentation. However, in the stories from Evita and Yuna, it appears that the Yogyanese *sanggar* placed emphasis on the tradition of court practice above Islamic religious principles, as they were asked to remove their head cover while dancing or to leave the *sanggar*. Therefore, Evita and Yuna were forced to choose between their Muslim identity and Javanese court dance, which they had been studying for years.

Movements in Javanese dance also created hesitations among female dancers. Some signature movements in the Javanese dance accentuates contortions. In particular, with a movement called *nyalang* that is typically used to close a section of sacred *bedhyaya* dance, dancers stretch their upper bodies extensively and float over the floor in a circular motion while extending their right hands horizontally and keeping the left hands by their faces. In another movement, called *mlaku telu*, which frequently appears in *gambyong* dance, female dancers hold and lift up the edge of their sarong (a long cloth that covers their legs, similar to a skirt) as they take steps, revealing their ankles. Indah, a member of Rampoe UGM, compares such movements with Acehese dance: “The movements in Acehese dance are made comfortable for [Muslim] women . . . there is no stretching of torso or bending over extensively in Acehese dance” (Indah, personal communication, July 2016). Movements in Acehese dance tend to be sharp, firm, and quick, without much fluidity or extension of limbs, neck, or torso—some of the characteristics in Javanese court dance and modern dance that Indah had experience practicing in the past. Having entered her early twenties—generally considered marrying age in Javanese society—Indah became aware of the relationship between female bodies, public display, and Islamic principles. Once she entered



Photo 10. A performance of Golek Montro, one of the Central Javanese court dance repertoires from the Mangkunegaran palace. The female dancers wear a typical costume for golek, which exposes arms, neckline, hair, and the general body line. Photograph by the author. Surakarta, August 2017.

Photo 11. A typical costume for Acehese female dance. The dancers' bodies are covered by long sleeves, long pants, a songket (long skirt), and elaborate head cover, exposing only their hands, feet, and faces to the audience. Photograph by the author. Banda Aceh, July 2015.



adulthood, those same movements became a source of worry, as she recognized them as unfit for Muslim women.

The use of head covers in Acehese dance and the nature of Acehese dance vocabularies give the impression of Acehese dance as a form appropriate for Muslim female dancers. Such Muslim identities found in Acehese dance offer young Yogyanese female dancers—who otherwise would have to stop dancing altogether—opportunities to stay engaged in performing arts. Having conducted over one hundred interviews with university students in Yogyakarta, anthropologist Nancy Smith-Hefner draws a clear picture of these young female dancers' sentiments: "No matter what their institutional affiliation or background, all voiced a similar and anxious concern: how to navigate Yogyakarta's increasingly cosmopolitan social scene with its expanded opportunities, amusements and temptations . . ." (2018, 16). By finding elements in Acehese dance that are compatible with their chosen Islamic principles, and that protect them from criticism based on social and religious expectations, young female dancers in Yogyakarta continue to express themselves through Acehese performing arts.

## Acehese Performing Arts as a Vehicle for Deepening Piety

Several scholars have written about the performing arts as a way to deepen one's experience in religion (Catlin-Jairazbhoy 2004; During 1997; Kapchan 2009; Kartomi 2010; Mottahedeh 2005; Shannon 2003). Some have further explored how the performing arts' connections to religion have elevated their prestige, public acceptance, and flourish (Danielson 1997; Mack 2004; Sumarsam 2011; Sunardi 2015). Such connections are seen in how Muhammad and Latif, two male members from Rampoe UGM, experienced their practice of Acehese music. Not only do they recognize Islamic greetings and religious formulae in the lyrics of Acehese songs, but more importantly, Muhammad and Latif identify Acehese music as a method through which they deepen their faith and religious practices.

Muhammad, a native of Jambi, Sumatra, commented on the complete divorce between his religious identity and popular forms of music today. Although wishing to explore his love for music, he faced the dilemma of finding a genre of music that he felt was meaningful and identifiable (Muhammad, personal communication, May 2016). Music that is popular among youth today—Indonesian and Western pop songs—are commonly about young love or carelessly searching for fun, which contradicts Muhammad's wish to live as an observant Muslim. On the other hand, in the lyrics of Acehese songs, he recognizes Islamic phrases integrated with traditional values.

For example, an Acehese song, *Saleum*, is sung in the beginning of some of the sitting dances:

*Assalaimualaikum jame baro trok* (Greetings to all the guests who have arrived)  
*Tamong tamong jak piyoh ateuh tika* (Please enter and sit comfortably on tikar mats)  
*Kareuna **saleum Nabi kheun sunah*** (Because this is the way the prophet taught us)  
*Jaroe tame **umat tanda mulia*** (To express the prosperity of our Muslim umat)

For non-Acehese Indonesians, the Acehese words in the lyrics above would not make much sense. However, hearing commonly understood Islamic or Arabic phrases (in bold), such as *Assalaimualaikum* (may peace be upon you), *saleum* (peace and blessing), *Nabi* (prophet), and *sunah* (the way of prophet Muhammad) resonates deeply with their Muslim faith. Therefore, when taken together with the knowledge of strong ties between Aceh and Islam, the practice of Acehese performing arts becomes a vehicle to remind themselves about Allah. Latif, a native of Surakarta, Central Java, whose parents frequently took him to performances of *wayang kulit* and *gamelan*, discussed how he recognized much more intimate engagements between Islam and lyrics in Acehese songs than what he heard in traditional music from Central Java (Latif, personal communication with the author, May 2016). In the

search for art practices that can become an extension of their religious experience, Muhammad and Latif therefore chose Acehese music and dance over other popular art forms.

In fact, such impacts of Acehese arts on the religious lives of arts practitioners extends even to the larger Muslim community of the *sanggar*. One Rampoe UGM rehearsal I visited was held between 5:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. and included two prayer times, *Magrib* and *Isya*, during the practice session. *Magrib*, which takes place at sunset, is especially time sensitive, as it allows for only a brief period to pray. As I observed, the practice session did not completely stop for *Magrib*; however, the members formed small groups to leave for prayer at a nearby *musholla*, a place used for praying, at different times. A number of Rampoe members commented that since joining this *sanggar*, their own religious practices had become stronger and more consistent. Female practitioners began to wear *jilbab* more regularly outside of the practice sessions. Feeling the sense of *umat* (Muslim community) among the *sanggar* members, more members began to participate regularly in *Magrib* prayers, extending their habit of praying to outside the practice sessions (Latif, personal communication, May 2016). Here, it is evident that Muslim practitioners find Acehese music and dance to be not only in line with their religious principles, but also able to promote Islamic values and practices even further. They are able to utilize the arts as a way of engaging with fellow practitioners, thus strengthening their connection to their religion and engendering a sense of Muslim community.

## Contesting Javanese Mysticism, Embracing Modern Islam, and Connecting to the World Outside Indonesia

A handful of writings on Javanese music and dance have discussed the connection between Javanese mysticism and the arts (Hughes-Freeland 2008, 2011; Sears 1989; Walton 2007; Suharti 2015; Sunardi 2015). Christina Sunardi (2015) examined the magnetic spiritual power that females possess and embody through their dances in East Java. Here, women's dance practices are believed to bring about prosperities, good harvest, and fertility. Felicia Hughes-Freeland (2011) illustrated the deep history behind local mythologies—particularly beliefs about the sacred power endorsed in the Bedhaya-Srimpi dance repertoire of the Solonese and Yogyane courts. Considered the property of the courts' sultan, Bedhaya-Srimpi repertoires are symbols, vehicles, and embodiments of mystical power. They carry on a lineage of prestige, of the court's cosmological significance, and even of political strategy to legitimize the governing power of the sultan over central Javanese people and lands.

David Harnish and Anne Rasmussen (2011) further discuss the historical and contemporary practice of mysticism in Java as a result of Sufi Islam. An example of Islam's syncretic marriage of mysticism with Hindu-Buddhist and Tantric practices, *Sekaten* sets of *gamelan* instruments are played as an act of *dakwah* for *maulid* (the observance of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday). Considered sacred, they are given offerings of flowers, food, holy water, and mantra each year. Such acts of worship for heirlooms are considered an ancient, mystical, and highly localized practice, which are not necessarily in accordance with the more conservative, global, and reformist Islamic views of Indonesia today.

The final vignette comes from Aulia, who participated in an international folk arts festival as a member of Rampoe UGM, and highlights how Acehese dance had engaged her with the global discourses about Islam. Expanding their horizons beyond Yogyakarta—and in doing so, connecting to the modern world—is something that many Indonesian youth seek. In works by Suzanne Brenner (1996) and Nancy Smith-Hefner (2007), we see how female university students in Yogyakarta sought after expressions of modernity for Muslim women. For instance, veiling signified transformation of self, renewal of society through commitment to an Islamic future, and the vision of an alternative modernity not based on Western models. In Java, it is a practice different from

those of their parents; today's youth consider their predecessors' customs to have resulted from their lack of education and modern worldview. Even though historically reinterpreted in an Islamic framework, some of the customary Javanese practices are considered, by the younger generations of Muslims in Yogyakarta, polytheistic and heretical inventions. In contrast, today, Acehese dance practice—which both requires female dancers to veil and offers them a ticket to engage with the world—creates opportunities for young women to embrace their self-determined kind of modern and global Islam.

Furthermore, Yogyanese practitioners recognize Aceh as connected with a historical Muslim network of the world. Not only that, but in Yogyakarta there currently exists the impression that Acehese Islamic practices come more directly from the “center,” the origin point, of Islam—the Middle East. In contrast, Javanese court dance practice, which is tightly connected to the ancient practice of mysticism and feudalism of the past, appears to be archaic and local—the opposite of the modern, worldly Islamic practices today's youth conforms to. Finally, some recent scandals, issues surrounding succession, and corruption involving the courts have caused society to lose trust in formerly prestigious rulers, and instead portray them as out of touch with modern times.<sup>5</sup>

Within this framework of discourses involving local versus global, and traditional-syncretic versus modern-reformist Islam, Aulia and her fellow dancers, performing on an international stage, experienced something far more powerful than the merely physical experience of leaving Indonesia. At a folk dance festival in Belgium, the audience saw the dancers as a Muslim dance group wearing head covers and with a religious mission. Instead of reacting to what could have been discriminatory comments about their dance practices and attire—missionaristic rather than artistic—they transformed this experience into an opportunity to find their niche within this showcase of global cultures. Finding themselves on a global platform, with the opportunity to serve as model representatives of Indonesia's Muslim population, they reached out to the audience through passionate performances and workshops. In doing so, they combated hypothetical Islamophobic attitudes at the festival and rectified the audience's false perceptions about their dance and religiosity, turning themselves into smiling ambassadors of Islam. These powerful opportunities that Acehese dance granted Aulia made her realize how the world outside of Indonesia sees Muslims, convincing her of her own responsibility as a global citizen to make the world a more knowledgeable and conscientious place.

In analyzing the voices of Yogyakarta's youth, it is clear that their choice to practice Acehese dance over the Javanese dance, their own cultural heritage, stems from the Islamic elements of Acehese performing arts. Furthermore, in Yogyakarta's current religious climate and particularly in the education sector, in which modern-reformist Islam thrives, the youth wish to be part of these changing trends. As a result, the Islamic identity in Acehese music and dance is amplified in Yogyakarta. Acehese arts provide them with opportunities to continue engaging with the arts, to deepen their piety, to engage with global events, and to distance themselves from Java's mysticism of the past.

## **Acehese Music and Dance in Banda Aceh: Separating Religion and Cultural Heritage**

Although Islamic elements in Acehese performing arts have fueled its popularization in Yogyakarta, arts practitioners in Banda Aceh, instead, deliberately distance the arts from religion. As seen in the quotation at the opening of this article, Acehese dancers were surprised to see how American audiences' questions focused on their religiosity. Although the Acehese recognize that Acehese music has historically held the role as *dakwah*, and that the sitting body positions in Acehese dance can be traced back to *dhikr*, they were puzzled by the questions I posed in interviews: “How does practicing music and dance impact your religious piety? How is it part of your religious life?” Instead, they emphasized the cultural heritage and traditional aspects of Acehese

music and dance. In this section, I discuss how today's socioreligious and political climate in Aceh necessitates an emphasis on Acehnese music and dance as cultural, rather than religious, practice.

The Indian Ocean earthquakes and tsunami in 2004 has impacted Acehnese arts significantly in several ways. Primarily, the practices of music and dance in Aceh have evolved from a vehicle of *dakwah* and *dhikr* to a form of entertainment, and most recently, to an expression of cultural identity in post-tsunami Aceh. The final and recent changes in the performance context have mainly been caused by the arrival of foreign NGOs, which have transformed people's perceptions of the arts from a pastime—entertainment for practitioners—to a celebration of cultural practices.<sup>6,7</sup> When Aceh became the site of humanitarian rescue projects from domestic and international NGOs, the staff who came into Aceh were racially, culturally, and religiously different from most Acehnese. Such differences manifested in the minds of the Acehnese with the recognition that Acehnese cultural practices are unique. After seeing how foreign NGO staff appreciated their music and dance, the Acehnese began to realize the potential for the performing arts to serve as an illustration of cultural identity, one that could be presented proudly and wield power.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, Aceh's post-tsunami religious reawakening has increasingly contested women's involvement in the arts. In May 2013, the regional government of North Aceh issued a *himbauan* that prohibited women over the age of eighteen from dancing onstage. Muhammad Thaib, the head of the regency of Lhoksweumawe city in North Aceh at the time, claimed that such a regulation would positively impact the ways of Islamic lives (Ma 2013). In the hierarchy of laws and regulations deriving from the Acehnese legal system, *himbauan* is considered "advice" from authoritative figures in society, meaning that if an individual does not follow *himbauan*, the jurisdiction cannot punish the person legally. However, because this *himbauan* was also supported by local Islamic scholars and the MPU (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama; Counsel of Islamic religious leaders), the decision about whether to follow this *himbauan* became something more: a question of people's religious morality. Issued in the name of Islam, the *himbauan* speaks to the conscience of the Muslim population.

Two other incidents that occurred during my fieldwork (2015–2016) highlight some of the challenges that performing arts practitioners in Aceh face today. One of the incidents involved a pair of Indian heritage dancers of the opposite sex who performed in close physical proximity onstage at a city-sponsored art festival. The other incident involved a young Acehnese male pop music singer with a large following of passionate adolescent female fans who sung along with admiration during his concerts. As discussed further in Ishiguro (2019a), both cases were criticized by regional government offices as well as the MPU, and the arts practitioners were banned from performing. In particular, the latter case became a powerful warning sign for many in Banda Aceh, as the ruling was no longer a contestation based on female bodies, for the singer had been male. Concerned with the pushback that artists now receive, Banda Aceh's performing arts communities have put into practice a number of strategies to navigate through their delicate conditions.

In Ishiguro (2019a), I discussed some of the strategies that Acehnese arts practitioners recently used to navigate through rather delicate socioreligious conditions. For example, teachers at *sanggar* educate their students about proper behavior when they share spaces with the opposite sex. By doing so, they hope to avoid instances in which the arts themselves become associated with misconduct, and therefore jeopardized (Khairul Anwar, personal communication, October 2015). Some choreographers, while continuing to create their original works, incorporate traditional Acehnese elements in movements, costumes, and accompaniments (Yusri Sulaiman, personal communication, September 2015). By doing so, the choreographers attempt to introduce their own originalities more gradually to the Acehnese public, preventing criticisms which may arise from unfamiliarity with contemporary dance. Finally, in 2015, a number of Acehnese arts practitioners, together with the Dewan Kesenian Aceh (Board of Acehnese Arts), became involved in the lawmaking process. Their goal was to create clear guidelines regarding the kind of performing arts practices that are

considered acceptable in Aceh, thus allowing them to avoid prosecution by regional leaders and religious scholars (Salamanga 2017).

Another such strategy used in Banda Aceh is to articulate the cultural aspects regarding the roots of Acehese music and dance, rather than its Islamic aspects. Several ethnomusicological works explore similar cases in which the performing arts exist in both religious and cultural arenas (Hardwick 2013; Harnish 2006, 2007; Wiebe 2017). In particular, Harnish (2007) illustrates how the indigenous Sasak people of Lombok Island in Indonesia have reshaped their performing arts—which originally existed solely as rituals—into tourist attractions. The secularization of music that originally had ritualistic meanings was a response to a complex sociocultural, religious, and economic condition. This involved the national government and tourism industries; the contestation was between the Muslim communities who practice localized forms of Islam and the more orthodox and recent conservative Muslim communities.

In the case of Aceh, during my fieldwork, many in Banda Aceh articulated the cultural aspects regarding the roots of Acehese arts as a way to respond to the religious objections against music and dance. One strong argument addresses how several dances—including the choreographic works of Yuslizar (1937–?), Ranup Lampuan, and Meusare-sare—were commissioned in the 1960s by the regional government for events and festivals (Murtala 2009). Today, these two dances in particular belong to a core repertory of Acehese dances presented at many events sponsored by the Acehese regional government. Ranup Lampuan and its variants, in particular, have become Aceh's signature piece and is frequently taught within both arts programs at public schools and *sanggar* in Banda Aceh. An additional argument brings up the fact that Pekan Kebudayaan Aceh (PKA; Acehese Cultural Week) has been held since 1958 and has continually received the sponsorship of the Acehese regional government. PKA has become a showcase at which Acehese art practitioners from all over the province gather to perform, further attracting domestic tourism. Considering how regional governments have played a significant role in promoting the arts, many feel it is incongruous for Acehese music and dance to now become the target of criticism, despite the significant socioreligious changes the province and its administration have gone through in this post-tsunami era.

Some of the more complex arguments that Acehese art practitioners frequently raised involved discourses on Aceh's history: particularly the fact that Islam and culture have long been emphasized as inseparable. Although there have been changes in Aceh's religious climate, many present the strong Islamic presence in Aceh—both throughout history and today—to rebut the current criticism regarding the practice of performing arts. They argue that Aceh has always followed the path of Islam, and Acehese music and dance have always existed side by side with the religion (Khairul Anwar, personal communication, 2015). Therefore, to deny their continuing involvement in Acehese traditional music and dance would be to deny their history, unique heritage, and vibrant culture, all of which are based in Islamic teachings.

Such discussions about how the role of music and dance may relate to Islam are far from reaching consensus, even within the Acehese performing arts communities. Those who follow more conservative views on religion state that religion and culture should not be mixed, as the former holds a far superior position (Zul Kifli, personal communication, 2015). To this end, they argue that Acehese music and dance should be carefully delineated as having a cultural role, rather than a religious one—a sentiment that is reflected in the initial quotation of this article by several Acehese dancers on the tour. Furthermore, Yusri Sulaiman, a prominent choreographer from Sigli (a city a few hours northeast of Banda Aceh) gave me another intriguing insight into the role of Acehese music and dance in society. Sulaiman emphasized the role of Acehese practice music and dance—which requires multiple bodies to work together as a way to cultivate *horizontal relations* between people, but not to deepen the *vertical relations* between God and people (Yusri Sulaiman, personal communication, November 2015). Therefore, for Yusri, Acehese music and dance belongs to the domain of sociocultural relations rather than religion. Consequently, by



Photo 12. A performance of Yusri Sulaiman's *Ranub* by dancers from *Sanggar Rampoe*, Banda Aceh. *Ranub* is a spin-off of Yuslizar's *Ranub Lampuan*, which is most frequently used as a welcome dance at events such as weddings and openings of seminars and banks. Photograph by the author. Banda Aceh, August 2016.

framing music and dance practices as distant from any religious affiliations, some Acehese practitioners attempt to defend the arts from the contestations raised by religious leaders.

The contrast between the function of Acehese music and dance in Yogyakarta and Banda Aceh today are also reflected in the repertoire practiced in each location. Yogyanese practitioners wish to respect the traditions of Acehese music and dance, which according to Yogyanese understanding, are inseparable from Islam. As such, they choose to perform exclusively traditional Acehese pieces that contrast with Jakarta, where *ratoeh jaroe*, a newly created dance, has seen an explosive popularity. On the other hand, in Banda Aceh, although traditional repertoires are still practiced, a large number of dancers I worked with expressed greater enthusiasm in practicing *kreasi baru*, newly choreographed pieces. Female dancers especially described how they find the *kreasi baru* repertoire more advanced, as it has a framework they can explore further. By supplanting religion as the authority on the expression of Acehese dances, performing arts practitioners in Banda Aceh argue that their art form is part of their cultural heritage and should therefore experience constant evolution.

## Conclusion

Although I mainly discussed the blooming of Acehese music and dance in Yogyakarta in recent years, Javanese court dance tradition in the city is still very much alive, especially in and around the royal courts. Furthermore, there are a number of *sanggar*, tourist attractions, traditional events, and after-school programs that continue to present opportunities for young dancers to learn court

dance repertoire. However, I argue that an increased emphasis on Islamic living—and particularly on conservative reformist Islamic principles—in Yogyakarta has been felt by the general population, and especially university youth. Outside the circle of university students who have turned to Acehese music and dance, there have also been disagreements at Javanese court dance *sanggar*, where older generations of dancers criticize young dancers who refuse to take off their head covers for practice sessions. As such, although the Javanese court dance still enjoys the patronage of the royal courts and national conservatories, the tradition's future remains uncertain.

In Yogyakarta's surrounding areas, such as Surakarta's neighboring regencies, some conservative Islamic communities have changed their performing arts policies. Javanese ethnomusicologist Sularso addresses that Sukoharjo and Kayanganyar, two regencies that were formerly under the Kasunanan royal court of Surakarta, a handful of Islamic boarding schools, and conservative communities have banned practices of music and dance; this ban was due to religious scholars and teachers at the schools who saw the practice of music and dance unfit for Muslim lives. To some, this development has been rather surprising, considering these regencies neighbor Surakarta, another court city where Javanese music and dance has thrived for decades. Sularso does not expect this ban to expand to Surakarta or Yogyakarta; however, he underscores that it only takes criticism from one religious leader in the community to make drastic changes concerning the permissibility of performing arts. Finally, Sularso highlights the increase in *sanggar* and similar organizations at universities in Surakarta and Yogyakarta, where university students primarily practice *shalawatan* and other song repertoires that do not come from Javanese music traditions or popular music scenes, but rather have Islamic elements in their instrumentation and lyrics. When one considers such cases in Yogyakarta and its vicinity, it is clear that the younger generation has taken center stage in this shift in consciousness.

As for the performing arts in Banda Aceh, I have argued that practitioners continue to exhibit resilience by creatively navigating through delicate socioreligious and political landscapes. Even more encouraging is the innovation and creativity evident among young arts practitioners. In one of the online discussions held in July 2020 by Murtala, a well-respected Acehese arts practitioner, comments from Ulfa and Safrizal, dancer-musicians from Banda Aceh in their twenties, left strong impressions: in order for the arts to further develop, the mindset of the Acehese people needs to change. They believe that through research, discussions, and education, the respect paid to the arts by the general public would rise, resulting in the creation of a space for further development of the Acehese performing arts.

Over the last three decades, Muslim societies in various parts of the world have seen an increase in the engagement of women in public, in artistic spaces, and in leadership roles (Kamalkhari 1998; Mahmood 2005; Mottahedeh 2005) as the result of the global Islamic resurgence. In contrast, modern-reformist Islam in Indonesia has shifted the traditional, syncretic Islam practiced in Java and beyond to a more conservative and reform-minded Islam (Peacock 1978). In my work, as well as others' studies of Indonesian Muslim women's performing arts (Ross 2013; Sunardi 2013), it is evident that this conservative turn in Indonesia has challenged women's engagement in the performing arts. Within such contexts, arts practitioners in Banda Aceh and Yogyakarta nonetheless continue to find ways to keep the arts as part of their lives, while also choosing to live as respectable Muslims. They sagely create strategies to navigate Islamic principles as well as recent sociocultural changes in Indonesia, thus enabling them to find their place in the arts and modern Islam with which they choose to engage.

## Notes

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1. Translated by author from Indonesian: “Kenapa mereka semuanya mau tanya tentang hubungan antara kesenian Aceh dan agama? Justru kalau hubungannya, gak ada dalam tariannya . . . Kalau dalam lagu-lagu, kami ucapkan Allah dan nabi Muhammad . . . tapi lagu-lagu Aceh itu, turuntumurun. Maknanya bukan Islam, kalau kami nyaninya” (communication with the author).

2. The formerly established Jaringan Intelektual Muda Muhammadiyah (JIMM; Network of Young Intellectual of Muhammadiyah), a youth liberal group, identifies strongly with Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL; Network of Islamic Liberal), a liberal NGO that promotes the acceptance of alternative religious ideas (van Bruinessen 2011). Yogyakarta also has Lembaga Kajian Islam Dan Social (LKIS; the Institute for Islamic and Social Studies), a major broker of religious pluralism in Java.

3. KAMMI aims to support Muslim university students in Indonesia to help foster good morals, deepen Islamic practice, and contribute to religion, the nation, and society. Founded in 1998 in Malang, East Java, KAMMI has offices at every major university. Its members create projects that contribute to improvements in social services, hold demonstrations concerning public policy, and connect Muslim students in the nation. Many members enter sectors of government, politics, and policymaking after graduating from university (Andre Octaviandra, personal communication with the author, September 2016).

4. Please see Ishiguro (2019a) for more detailed discussion on the gender and age groups of Acehese art practitioners.

5. In 2014, the royal courts of Solo and Pakubawana XIII were accused in an alleged rape of a middle school student (see Detik News 2014). Furthermore, the succession of the king’s line also made the news in 2004, disrupting Solonese trust of the royal house (see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/world/asia/17solo.html>).

6. Kartomi (2014) addresses an interesting proverb from Aceh: “If we lose our children, we at least know where they are buried, but if we lose our traditional customs (*adat*), we shall never find them again (2).” This proverb, according to Kartomi, indicates the prominent place of traditional practices in Acehese society. According to my interviews, arts and culture customs before the tsunami disaster were not uniformly prominent in all parts of Aceh. As such, I propose that the tsunami disaster resulted in the practice of arts and culture becoming more uniformly understood and recognized as part of the Acehese’s proud cultural identity.

7. This is evident through how practitioners typically present themselves: in traditional *rapai tuha* or *rapai* ensemble practice, the musicians face inward and form a circular floor formation, meaning there is no “front” that faces the audience. Traditional dance forms such as *seudati* and *rateb meuseukat* were also typically practiced on the ground or in *meunasah*, a semi-outdoor structure where various daily events, such as religious lessons or socialization, were held.

8. Furthermore, efforts by domestic NGO groups have utilized music and dance of Aceh as methods to cope with children’s trauma after the tsunami—a disaster that resulted in many of them losing their families, homes, and schools. In particular, a program called TALOE that was managed by Murtala and Khairul Anwar, two prominent art practitioners of Aceh, reached out to local youth who were trained to teach music and dance of Aceh to orphaned children due to the natural disaster. One outcome of this program has been an increase in the number of youth who engage with Acehese arts—both in teaching and performing. Today, nearly fifteen years after the tsunami, many who had been young teaching staff at this organization are still engaged in the arts, teaching and running the performing arts scenes in Banda Aceh. For a more detailed discussion, see Ishiguro (2019a), Kartomi (2014) and Twarog (2010).

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