

ACEH

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ACEH

History, Politics and Culture

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PREFACE

The tsunami that struck on 26 December 2004 has caused tremendous long-lasting suffering in the coastal areas of Aceh and its surroundings. The process of post-tsunami recovery and reconstruction in this hard-hit region will take considerable time and not be easy. The task of trying to reshape Aceh's future, in every sense, is so enormous that help is not only required from the local, provincial, and national authorities, and from ordinary Indonesian citizens, but also from the international community. Foreigners already arrived immediately after the disaster, and numerous organizations have established long-term aid and reconstruction programmes.

However, comprehensive background information on Acehnese history, politics and culture, which would benefit expatriate aid workers in their dealings with the Acehnese people, is still difficult to find. This book is an attempt at providing such helpful knowledge. It is written by specialists in Indonesian and Acehnese studies from a number of countries, together with Acehnese scholars.

The task of collating this knowledge had its own difficulties. In certain areas of knowledge, publications are extremely rare and often even date back to the colonial era. Furthermore, it should be remembered that large parts of the region have not been accessible to foreign researchers for decades due to the civil war. Therefore, this book represents, in many aspects, a new, pioneering endeavour in Acehnese studies. Our hope is that, in the future, the cooperation between Acehnese and foreign scholars can be much closer than in the past, in order to enhance the international production and dissemination of academic knowledge on Aceh.

A lingering legacy of a tragic past is the collective trauma in Aceh of being colonized and occupied by outside forces. In particular, the Dutch colonial period, which featured the long and particularly cruel Aceh War (1873–1913), has left deep scars in Acehnese historical memory. In the pre-colonial period, much of Aceh was important and wealthy, and well integrated into the international trade routes between the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. However, that “golden era”, as it is commemorated today, was ended by force, cutting Aceh off from its previous international partners and networks. The Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945 and the decades of civil war after Indonesian Independence also constitute important factors in the construction of modern Acehnese identity.

Islamic tradition in Aceh, initially spreading along the trading routes of the Indian Ocean, is among the oldest in insular Southeast Asia. It was in this region that one of the first Muslim sultanates in the archipelago once flourished. Building on the important historical role of Islam, it seems that the various traumas that Aceh has suffered since the colonial era have intensified the central role of religion and religiosity in Acehnese culture even more.

Another important factor in defining contemporary Aceh is, of course, its political framework. Hopefully, the Helsinki Peace Accord of 2005 may have laid the foundation for the successful further development of Aceh. Provided that the new political situation will promote peace and stability, the economic recovery of Aceh could exceed all expectations. The erstwhile “problem province” of Indonesia might then develop into one of the most booming parts of the archipelago. After having experienced all this trauma and suffering, there is at least a very strong motivation to finally improve the situation in Aceh in all areas. In the inner-Acehnese discussions, education plays a central role in helping the next generation of Acehnese to achieve a brighter future. There seems to be a strong will to improve not only the primary and secondary levels of education, but also the universities and other higher institutions of learning. The editors of and contributors to this volume hope that this strong emphasis on education might be supported at least in part by the present volume. In this sense, the main target groups of this book are (1) foreign aid and reconstruction workers in Aceh, (2) Acehnese who would like to look into international scholarly approaches to Aceh, and (3) international students who are interested in a scholarly introduction into a variety of aspects of Acehnese history, politics and culture.

The editors deliberately have invited authors who represent different academic schools of thought, from Germany and Switzerland, the Netherlands, the United States, Australia, and Singapore. The resulting volume, hence, contains a collection of highly varied chapters, thereby reflecting the current

great heterogeneity of international studies on Aceh and Indonesia. That “a thousand flowers may bloom” is the spirit in which this “bunch of flowers” (*bunga rampai*) is offered; the editors hope that the present miscellany will encourage further studies on this fascinating region to delve into the multifaceted realities of Aceh.

Arndt Graf, Susanne Schröter, and Edwin Wieringa

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