

**The Disobedient *Uleebalang*:
Sarekat Islam and Colonial Civil Rule in Aceh, 1918-1923**



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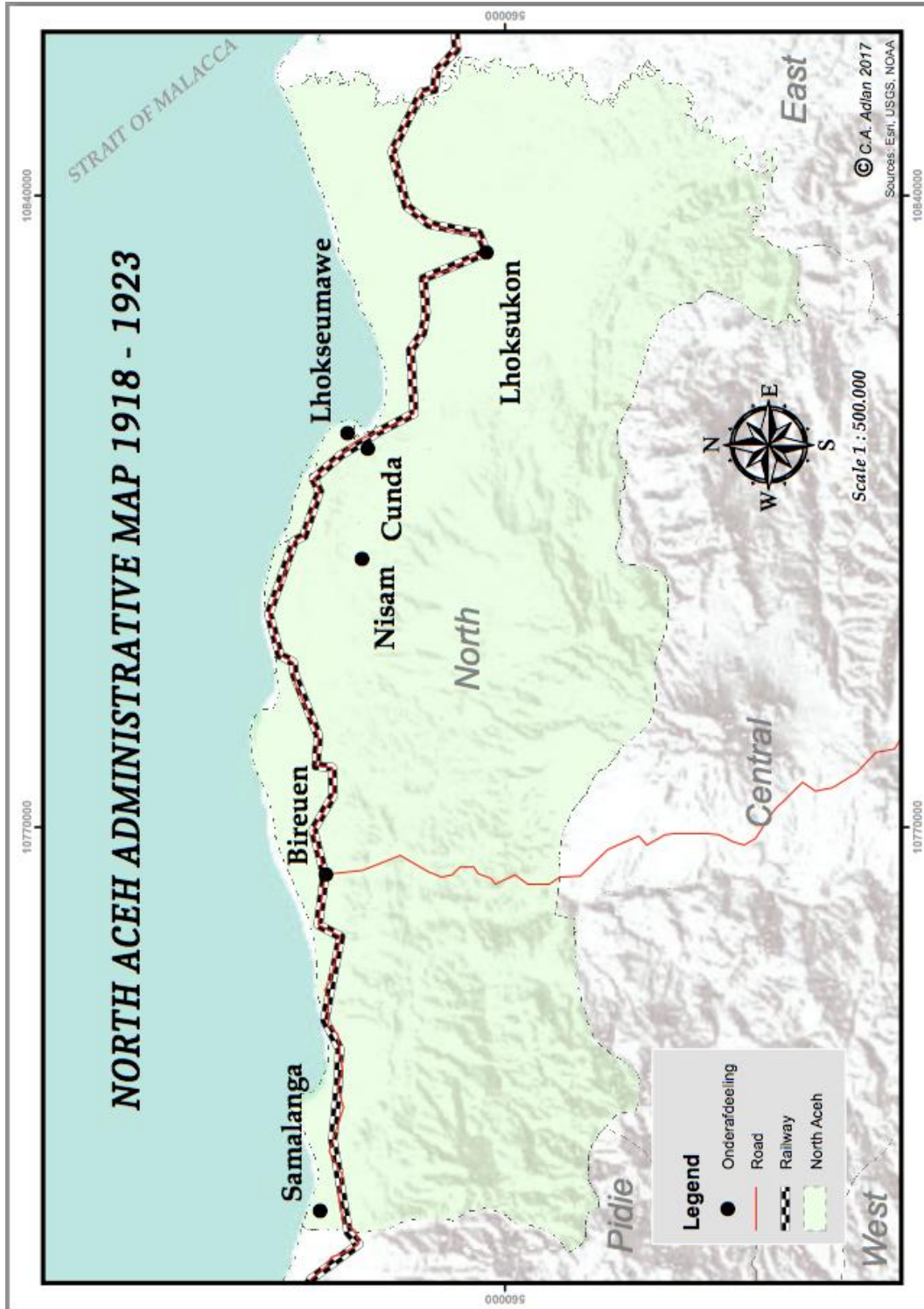
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Map 1: Aceh, ca. 1918-1920s



Map adapted by Chaidir Adlansyah from the original map by Robert Cribb, *Digital Atlas of Indonesian History* (Copenhagen 2010): "Map of Uleebalang territories in early 20th Century" (may be consulted via www.indonesianhistory.info)

Map 2: Afdeeling Noord Aceh, ca. 1918-1920



Introduction

This thesis will argue that the collaboration between local elites in Aceh, the *uleebalang*, and the Dutch colonials after the establishment of civil governance in 1918 was an uneasy one. In contrast with existing historiography that depicted the position of *uleebalang* merely as the henchmen of the colonial authorities, this thesis will examine a specific event, that is the involvement of several *uleebalang* in North Aceh into the mass organization *Sarekat Islam* (Union of Islam) in the 1920s, to provide new insight into the nature of the collaboration and the making of modern political life in Aceh. In brief, this case presented anxiety and distrust of Dutch officials towards their local collaborator, the *uleebalang*, due to their activity in *Sarekat Islam*.

By focusing on 1918-1923, this thesis attempts to analyze how Aceh was integrated into the colonial administration of the Dutch East Indies by means of collaboration with its local elites. Although the collaboration already started prior to 1918, but the first civil governor, A.G.H. Van Sluys, was installed only in this year, which marked the integration of Aceh into the Dutch East Indies administration. Such integration, arguably, not only affected how Aceh was governed, but also how local resistance was organized after the end of military rule by looking on the coming of *Sarekat Islam* in Aceh and its development until 1923, a year after the punishment of two *uleebalang* from North Aceh, Teuku Rhi Budjang and Teuku Muhammad Said because of their activity in the organization by the colonial authorities of Dutch East Indies. Rather than looking at the selected events of *Sarekat Islam* in North Aceh merely as local dynamics as previous research has done, this thesis will discuss the connection between local events with wider networks of anti-colonial resistance in the Dutch East Indies between 1918-1923. In doing so, this thesis aims to fill the gap in the historiography of colonial Aceh in its early years of civil rule while also contributing to the historiography of colonial civil administration of the Dutch East Indies.

First and foremost, it is important to understand that Aceh was subjugated by the Dutch quite late compared to most territories in the archipelago. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, ship traffic from the Atlantic Sea to the Indian Ocean was intensified. Aceh, in the northern tip of Sumatra, was the main entrance into both the Dutch and British colonies. However, the Aceh Sultanate had little to no power to control piracy along the Strait of Malacca. There was a growing anxiety among Dutch officials that other forces, such as France, the USA or Italy would interfere due its strategic position. This would lead the Dutch to annexe Aceh for the purpose of the "rounding off" (*afronding*) of its colony in 1873.¹ While the expansion of Dutch colonialism in Aceh was made possible by military forces and technological developments, these aspects were not sufficient for maintaining the colony itself.

¹ Laffan, Michael. *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (London: Routledge, Curzon, 2003) 39-40; Further notes about the rounding off process in Aceh and colonialism as economic expansion see Locher-Scholten, Elsbeth. 'Dutch Expansion in the Indonesian Archipelago Around 1900 and the Imperialism Debate' in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol 25, I (1994) and Lindblad, Thomas. 'Economic Aspects of the Dutch Expansion in Indonesia, 1870-1914' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, I (1989).

In order to manage and develop the colony, the Dutch aimed to exercise control over all sorts of administrative terrains, such as the economy, law, politics and religion, in all layers of its territorial structure. However, such administrative tasks could only be performed effectively if the officers were also capable to adapt and live with the local inhabitants. In line with this, Carl A. Trocki argues that the employment of European officials would require a high cost for the colony because they would bring their family and their "European cultural baggage".² Apart from that, European officials could hardly perform well due to the cultural and language barriers with the locals in the colony. Thus, it would be more efficient if non-European colonial officers could bridge the differences between the natives and the colonial government. Therefore, collaboration with non-European intermediaries was necessary to eliminate the barriers and overcome challenges regarding local issues.

The exercise of power by the colonial government was performed in two ways: through "direct rule" and "indirect rule". The former was the exercise of authority by the colonial government that was, deriving from eighteenth-century political thought as introduced by reformists Warren Hastings and Lord Cornwallis in India. Meanwhile, "indirect rule" was performed through the collaboration with local political structures. By making a comparison between "indirect rule" in the British and Dutch colonies, Mahmood Mamdani compared the role of Sir Henry Maine of British India with Snouck Hurgronje of the Dutch East Indies. Both of them dealt with a colony that had strong religious and culture values. In his public lecture *Define and Rule*, Mamdani distinguishes direct and indirect rule in two manners. First, previous empires such as the Roman and British empire before the mid-nineteenth century aimed to subjugate the elites rather than the mass population in its colonies. Second, direct rule intended to efface diversity, sometimes by assimilation through its local elites. According to Mamdani, the purpose of indirect rule was different that in his words, "not only to recognize the difference in a colonized society but also to frame it."³

An important major work on indirect rule and the local bureaucracy in the Dutch East Indies was written by Heather Sutherland, *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite: The Colonial Transformation of the Javanese Priyayi*.⁴ In this work, she does not only provide an explanation of the socio-cultural processes behind the bureaucratization of Javanese local elites, the *priyayi*, but also elaborates on their position in the crucial periods from 1918-1919. During these years, the mass organization Sarekat Islam had grown into an influential anti-colonial movement in Java. Furthermore, Sutherland shows that, the division B (*Afdeeling B*) of Sarekat Islam in Garut had unfolded the gap between the local elites with its people. Situated in the study of indirect rule during the peak of the anti-colonial movement in the Dutch East Indies, this thesis attempts to complement to the work of Sutherland by looking at the relationship between Dutch and local officials in Aceh.

² Trocki, Carl A. "Political Structures in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" in Nicholas Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia Vol. III*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004) 83.

³ Mamdani, Mahmood. *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Harvard University Press: 2012), p. 1-2.

⁴ Sutherland, Heather. *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite: The Colonial Transformation of the Javanese Priyayi* (Singapore, Heinemann: 1979).

Regarding the historiography of Aceh under colonialism, a handful of literature on the fierce and long war after the failed military invasion in 1873 has been written by numerous scholars, but few examined the transition from military to civil rule and the involvement of local elites in this process.⁵ One of the few works that did shed light on these topics, is the work of Munawiah, *Birokrasi Kolonial di Aceh 1903-1942*.⁶ In her work, Munawiah shows that after the end of military rule in 1903, the colonial authorities applied both direct and indirect rule, by asking the *uleebalang* to sign a short contract declaration, called *Korte Verklaring*, to collaborate as “independent rulers” (*zelfbestuurders*). Her work discusses the bureaucratization of the *uleebalang*, the shifting of administrative territories, and components of the colonial civil infrastructure, such as public health facilities, education, legal court and the emerging of local modern elites. In short, her work dealt with the details of the structure of civil governance in Aceh. However, Munawiah did not explore the relationship *between* the *uleebalang* and the Dutch and the obstacles faced by successors of the early *uleebalang* who signed the *Korte Verklaring*.

In the context of emerging political organizations in the Dutch East Indies during the late colonial period, Aceh was not featured proportionally. The political activity of the *uleebalang* in colonial Aceh was mentioned in the dissertation of David Kloos, “Becoming better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia”. Kloos stated that the coming of Sarekat Islam as the Java-based first mass organization to Aceh had made the Dutch anxious due to its “secretive character”.⁷ Its members in North Aceh were believed to take a ‘holy oath’ because of provocation from the three *uleebalang*, and the colonial government impeached them to submit themselves under the leadership of Cokroaminoto, the leader of Central Sarekat Islam in Batavia.

This case led to the punishment of the two *uleebalang*, Teuku Rhi Budjang and Teuku Muhammad Said, who were sent into exile to far flung places by the end of 1921. Anthony Reid concluded in his work *The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra* that the involvement of the *uleebalang* in Sarekat Islam was similar to the involvement of traditional elites in other parts of the Dutch East Indies, that is “to seek their legitimacy in popular support rather than Dutch recognition”.⁸ Both of these descriptions about *uleebalang* and Sarekat Islam in Aceh are largely based on colonial political reports and focus only on a few details of the self-representation of the *uleebalang* in their writings. Also, both of these works have overlooked how the colonial authorities interpreted the involvement of their subordinates in Sarekat Islam and the connection between such local events with those in other parts of the Dutch colonial administration. By setting the closing year of the period under study on 1923, this thesis aims to draw a connection between the events in Aceh with the rise of the anti-

⁵ See Alfian, Ibrahim. *Perang di Jalan Allah, 1873-1912* (Jakarta, Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1987) and Van ‘t Veer, Paul. *De Atjeh-oorlog* (Amsterdam, De Arbeiderspers, 1980).

⁶ Munawiah. *Birokrasi Kolonial di Aceh, 1903-1942* (Banda Aceh: Ar-Raniry Press, 2007).

⁷ Kloos, David. *Becoming better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia*, Proefschrift (Amsterdam: 2013) p. 88.

⁸ Reid, Anthony. *The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford: 1979) p. 17.

colonial movement in the Dutch East Indies at large, marked by largest railway workers strikes in Java in the same period.

Research Question and Source Selection

The central research question of this thesis is: *what was the nature of collaboration between the colonial authorities of the Dutch East Indies with the local elites in Aceh during the periods of civil rule?* Following this, the sub-questions will investigate the foundation of civil government in Aceh, who and why certain elements of people in Aceh were involved, how they did represent themselves, as well as, how and why the colonial government perceived it. This will be done particularly by looking at the reactions of the colonial authorities on the presence of Sarekat Islam in North Aceh as expressed in decision letters, political reports, correspondence between colonial authorities in Aceh and Batavia and *proces verbaal* with the local officials in Aceh.

This thesis will use archival records kept in the National Archives of the Netherlands, Leiden University Library and The National Library of Indonesia (Perpustakaan Nasional Indonesia—PERPUSNAS) that cover the period of 1918-1923. By including both colonial and local primary sources, this thesis attempts not only to examine the nature of collaboration between colonial authorities and local elites, but also to see how the material sources correspond or contradict each other.

- *Ministrie van Kolonie, Politieke Verslagen van Buitengewesten Aceh, 1918-1923*

The political reports from this archive will be used as the primary source to understand how the colonial authorities collected information on Sarekat Islam, what their concerns towards the organization were and how they understood its influence among the people in Aceh. This archive was preserved by the Nationaal Archief of The Hague and consist of correspondence, instructions, interrogation transcripts and secret letters from various colonial authorities regarding the involvement of the *uleebalang* from North Aceh in Sarekat Islam in Aceh.

- *Local Newspapers: Hindia Sepakat (1921), Benih Mardika (1921) and Oetoesan Ra'jat (1923)*

Two newspapers published in Sibolga, East Sumatra, namely *Hindia Sepakat* and *Benih Mardika*, kept in the National Library of Indonesia (Perpustakaan Nasional Indonesia—PERPUSNAS) will be used as primary sources since members of Sarekat Islam in Aceh used it as a medium to criticize the colonial government. Meanwhile, the newspaper *Oetoesan Ra'jat*, published in Langsa, East Aceh, kept in the Special Collection of Leiden University Library, will be used to see the connections between the events in North Aceh in the larger setting of anti-colonial resistance in Dutch East Indies.

- *Algemeen Overzicht van de Inlandsche Pers 1921-1923*

This is a compilation of monthly reports made by the *Kantoor voor de Volkslectuur* on articles of Malay and Chinese newspapers in the Dutch East Indies. This special bureau

was established in 1917 to monitor the publication of vernacular press in Dutch East Indies and provided a monthly summary for colonial officials about its issues and development. This compilation is useful to see which newspaper and periodicals, and what kind of news and articles, were put under colonial surveillance during the given period.

Chapter Outline Description

The first chapter will provide an explanation of the transition from military to civil rule during the colonial period in Aceh. As this transition was made possible by Snouck Hurgronje, this chapter will also discuss his role and how his advice became fundamental in the collaboration process. This chapter attempts to analyse the sub-question: *how was the civil governance in Aceh founded and administrated?*

In the second chapter, the sub-question is: *who and why were seen as a compatible collaborator for the civil governance and how did they represent themselves?* Thereby, this second chapter will look at existing literature on Sarekat Islam and the role of the *uleebalang* as part of the bureaucrats in the civil governance of Aceh. By using new primary source material, such as writings of several *uleebalang* in North Aceh published in "*Hindia Sepakat*" and "*Benah Mardika*" in 1921 on their involvement in Sarekat Islam, this chapter aims to add a new perspective on how *uleebalang* understood and perform their position, which has formally been overlooked.

The third chapter will examine the reactions from the Dutch civil governance towards the unexpected involvement of their collaborator in the Sarekat Islam. It will look at actions of colonial officers to prevent the growing influence of the *uleebalang* from North Aceh, based on the archives of the *Politieke Verslagen* from 1918 onwards, that consist of series of interrogations, reports, correspondence and recommendation letters to and from the assistant residents in other parts of Aceh, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and also the Governor General of the Dutch East Indies.

As a whole, this thesis aims to demonstrate how the specific case of the involvement from the *uleebalang* into Sarekat Islam can provide new insight into the nature of collaboration during the civil governance, as well as into a shift in modern political life in Aceh.

