



Provisional Notes on How “Hilarious” Living Under Sharia Law (The Case of Aceh)

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Abstract

Drawing upon anthropological theory of resistance and testing its limits, I will present a closer observation on how dissenting voices to the state project of Sharia in contemporary Aceh look on the ground. Without thereby renouncing its violent effects, some ethnographic stories I recount in this writing will reveal how the implementation of Sharia in contemporary Aceh has created inherently amusing situations and how it has occasionally become a humor producing machine.

Keywords: *Sharia, Aceh, Political Humor, Postcolonial, Anthropology*

“The worst enemy of authority is, therefore, disdain and the safest means to undermine respect is laughter” (Hannah Arendt, 1970 : 45)

A. Introduction

On June 12, 2015, I was at the Gampong Pineung Mosque, Banda Aceh. I joined a group of journalists who came there to report a public caning. Since 2010, along with my journalist friends I have attended more than 20 public canings across the Aceh province, collecting stories and observing people’s attitudes toward the revival of this classical form of spectacle punishment.¹ Similar to the previous canings I attended, as the congregation comes out from Friday prayers I heard an announcement from inside the mosque calling for the offenders to be brought to the stage. An official came onto the stage and read out the judge’s disposition from the Sharia Court. The first offender was taken out of the paddy wagon; she was a female. The official read through a microphone that the woman was arrested for

having pre-marital sex. A sharia police (known in Aceh as WH, abbr.. *Wilayatul Hisbah*) escorted her onto the stage. The official from the Sharia Court continued to announce that the offender will get eight strokes. The caning will not hurt, he said, as it is only intended to inflict shame. At the same time, a number of people who previously attended the Friday sermons hurriedly left the mosque yard. I have also seen this paradox several times. It became typical, nonetheless, but I came to realize how worth paying attention to it. In order to comprehend the reason why they were leaving the yard while others joined, I confronted and asked why they leave the arena. This time someone replied me “I am hungry, can’t skip my lunch in order to see this *hipokrit* thing.”² Another man told me calmly that “Islam doesn’t teach you to humiliate people in front of public.”³ But, still, many people remained before the stage.

Meanwhile, the person administering the punishment, who was holding a rattan cane about a metre and a half long and wearing a ninja-like mask, came on the stage. This person is known as the *algojo*. The official with a microphone gave the flagellator instructions to begin, and started to count from “one!”. Just a moment before the *algojo* hit the female offender with the rattan cane, she raised her hand and said that she needed to take something from her pocket. She took out a smartphone and took a selfie of her dancing body as she moved. The entire audience bursted out in laughter, including the officials. But it did not take a while, soon after she was insulted by the audience. They shouted and mocked her, ordering the *algojo* to strike her. The *algojo* delivered the punishment, striking her back eight times while she shouted, “I don’t feel ashamed! I don’t feel ashamed!”. The next offender, a male, was brought onto the stage and he got 10 strokes. The punishment was then declared over and everyone left.

When one reads about spectacle punishment reenacted in present-day Aceh Michael Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1977) might come into one’s mind. In this seminal work Michel Foucault traces profound changes in Western penal system from public torture to prison. Foucault starts by contrasting two stories of penalty: the public torture of Damien, the regicide in the mid-18 century, and the exhibition of the prisoners a century later. Foucault warns the readers about the disappearance of the public executions marking the emergence of bio-power and the capitalist mode of production via the

confluence of discipline. On the contrary, the modern Sharia state of Aceh seems to work in the opposite direction. Gaining significant support from Islamist groups and local elites, the local government adopted and modified forms of medieval Islamic punishment to have them incorporated within the instrument of modern state power. Hundreds of caning stages have been set up throughout the Aceh province where bodies of the Sharia violators will be put on display and hit by the executioners.

Despite the fact that the above execution is definitely a public, highly visible ceremony, what is different about the Sharia punishment and the public physical punishment we read about in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is that the intention of physical punishment in present day Aceh is not torture nor to create useful individuals in order to increase the convict's productive efficiency, but shaming. What are the actual the intended effects of public shaming? Why did the female offender respond in such a theatrical, if not humorous, way? What is the relationship between the audience to state power? And to what extent is Sharia intended to further the state's project of extracting knowledge about Aceh and the Acehnese?

Many scholars have documented the implementation of Sharia law in Aceh (see for example in Hooker 2003; Blackburn 2004; Lindsey and Hooker 2007; Salim 2008; Buehler 2008; Ramly 2010; Fanani 2011; Feener 2013; Reed 2015), but only a few paid attention to a tension between state actors and non-state actors over the legitimacy, significance, and effectiveness of the implementation.⁴

Here I choose to focus on "unintended effect" of the implementation of Sharia, looking at phenomena which unintentionally turned the Sharia regime of Aceh to become a humor producing machine. How is it possible such ritual punishment I describe above be fertile for political humor? Furthermore, how do we determine whether satirical action is resistance? I will examine what constitutes political in humor and vice versa, how humor can become subversive and how they became part of the set of actions that oppositional non-movements use against the Sharia regime in Aceh.

In the following section, I will provide a historical backdrop for this present research. My approach to discuss the implementation of Sharia in Aceh will be a broad adaptation of the analysis of "*la longue*

duree”, a historical totality in space and time, as invoked by French historian Fernand Braudel (1980). In searching “ways to produce ethically responsible knowledge in a world riven by violence and dominative forms of power” (Murphy et.al 2011), I owe to the very tradition of many anthropologists working on Indonesia undertaking an interdisciplinary project joining ethnography and history (see for example Siegel 1969, 1986; Steedly 1993, 2013; Tsing 1993; Pamberton 1997; Spyer 2000; Li 2001; Stoler 2008; Strassler 2010; Rutherford 2013). Juxtaposing people’s attitudes toward the implementation of the law with local political histories, the following section will examine the meaning of today’s calls for the application of the Sharia in Aceh, the extent to which some Acehnese see it as an extension or a departure from previous forms of Islamic punishment while some others see it in the opposite direction.

B. Aceh History and the Modern State Project of Sharia

In 1619 a French armed expedition led by General Augustin De Beaulieu sailed to Sumatra. The fleet, known as the “Fleet of Montmorency,” arrived in Bandar Aceh in 1621 and remained in the city port for approximately 6 months (from January 30 to July 25). At that time, the sultanate of Aceh Darussalam was already a center of trade and military power in Southeast Asia. Being in Aceh for six months, Beaulieu observed and left us one of the best accounts of Acehnese society in the early 17th century. It was the period when Aceh was under the reign of Iskandar Muda, who ruled the sultanate from 1607 to 1636. The image of the Sultan’s power has been central in the Acehnese popular memory until today. Iskandar Muda is remembered as the greatest ruler and lawgiver of Aceh, the Shadow of God on earth who once ruled Aceh in accordance with the Book of Allah.

In his accounts, Beaulieu put details that are gripping enough for us to imagine how absolute and unchallenged the Sultan’s power was. With regard to the enforcement of the Sharia law, Beaulieu writes “every day the King would have people’s noses cut off, eyes dug out, castrations, feet cut off, or hands, ears and other parts mutilated, very often for some very small matter” (cf. Reid 1995: 67). But, as Beaulieu continues, “no one who has been punished in this way (mutilated), whether by the King’s order or by the judge’s, suffers any disgrace on this account, no matter what crime he has committed; and if anyone taunts him about it, and he kills him in retaliation, he will not be

punished for this, since they consider that the culprit has been sentenced by a judge and has paid a sufficient penalty. He should not be blamed any further for this crime, as anyone can make a mistake” (Reid 1995: 68).

From the last sentence of De Beaulieu’s story, quoted above, we can quickly notice a sharp contrast between the physical punishment under the Sultan and the physical punishment as “re-enacted” by the contemporary Sharia authority in Aceh. As I have underlined above, the purpose of the contemporary Sharia punishment is *not to inflict pain but inflicting shame upon the offenders*. This of course doesn’t match with the romanticized Sharia laws under the sultan, which clearly protected people from any disgrace after they fulfilled the punishment. Such an inconsistency, as far as I am concerned, has never been discussed in any contemporary “discursive debates,” to use Talal Asad’s concept, concerning the extent to which the current implementation of the laws depart from previous forms of Islamic punishment. Besides being implemented as a result of political negotiation, in the early days of its contemporary implementation, one could argue that nothing was important for Acehnese Muslims more than to withstand any attempt to challenge the importance of religion in their lives (Siegel 2014). That is convincing when one thinks of colonialism (the rule of unbelievers), the bloody armed conflict, and the tsunami that accompanied the history of this region.

Acehnese history for the last two centuries is a series of catastrophes. Defeat by the Dutch, failure to gain Japanese support after aiding them, then a revolution that knocked local leaders out of office but that left nothing satisfactory to replace them (Siegel 2012). Since then, it appears to be impossible to write about Aceh without mentioning Islam and resistance. Both terms feature prominently and appear almost intertwined in most studies about history of Aceh and Acehnese politics. Islam takes central stage in the construction of Acehnese identity as inscribed in an Acehnese proverb “*lagee zat ngon sifeut*,” ‘inseparable, like essence and its attribute’ (see more in Siegel 1969; Alfian 1997; Aspinall 2009; Graft 2010; Samuels 2012; Kloos 2013). A romanticized past of Acehnese resistance to Dutch colonialism made this construction stronger. Acehnese bravery and rebelliousness are inscribed in stories of the Holy War against the colonial infidels. Acehnese historical recognition no doubt owes a lot to the presence of Islam in the region and the image of the colonial enemy. The role of the

ulama, Muslim religious clerics, who led the struggles, is glorified to emphasize the centrality of Islam to the movement's ideology (Alfian Sjamsuddin 1985; Reid 1979; Sulaiman 1999;). Acehnese orientation towards political resistance and Islamic identity were further reinforced during the National Revolution (1945-1949) and became complex after national independence. In the eyes of the Indonesian central government, Aceh has always been a special and troublesome part of the nation. The history of Acehnese resistance to the Dutch was essential to national identity and narratives of liberation from the colonizer, yet Aceh heroism and exceptionalism threatened Indonesian nationalism (Drexler 2008). What follows after that were stories about Muslims opposing Muslims.

In 1953, after wholeheartedly supporting Indonesia's struggle for independence, Aceh started to clash with Jakarta. The first Acehnese revolt against the central government began when their leaders proclaimed allegiance to Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia under Imam Kartosuwiryo. The idea of Indonesia was still there; the struggle aimed to make Indonesia more Islamic. Soekarno saw Islam was the cause, and thus it became the solution to be offered. Sharia law was granted for Aceh in a ceasefire, which was agreed upon in 1959. In May 1959 Aceh became the Special Region (*Daerah Istimewa*) of Aceh. This gave Aceh autonomy in the fields of religion, customs, and education (van Dijk 1981; Sjamsuddin 1985). Only three months after the ceasefire, Soekarno proclaimed a return to the 1945 constitution. The ceasefire accomplished nothing. This provoked tension and dissatisfaction of the Acehnese with the central government.

In 1976, another revolt emerged after the forces of Suharto monopolized Acehnese resources (Tiro 1982; Kell 1995; Hasan 2000). The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) sought to establish an independent state, and this rebellion movement was essentially secular-nationalist in orientation (Aspinal & Crouch 2002; Schulze 2004; Patria 2009; Aspinall 2008, 2009, 2013). The Indonesian Army, through its notorious special forces (Kopassus), sought to crush this bid. They designated Aceh as a “special combat zone” (*Daerah Operasi Militer/DOM*), leading to the death and disappearance of thousands of Acehnese. According to many studies of the Aceh conflict, exploitation of natural resources and human rights abuses, thus not Islam, was the main cause behind the desire of the Acehnese people to secede from Indonesia (Sulaiman 1999; Siapno 2002; Sukma 2004; Reid 2006;

Schulze 2004, 2007; Drexler 2008; Patria; Aspinall, 2009). In 1999 when almost two million Acehnese gathered in front of the Grand Mosque of Banda Aceh, what they demanded was not an independent state but the need for security, prosperity and a sense of belonging after the protracted three decades civil war between GAM and the Indonesian military, which killed at least 20,000 Acehnese. But the central government again misunderstood the Acehnese voice.

In the subsequent part I will show how this misunderstanding went on and eventually led to a backlash from some ordinary Acehnese.

C. Sharia as the Modern State Project

In 1999, as an effort to quell the GAM and presumably to prevent the Acehnese public from joining the movement, the central government granted the implementation of Sharia to the Aceh province. Granting Sharia law to the Aceh province was of course a political experiment since it goes against the basic principles of Indonesia's Pancasila state ideology. Hamzah Haz, the Indonesian vice president at that time, told the press that the decision to apply Sharia in Aceh was "*uji coba*," a test (Amal & Panggabean, 2003: 58). President Megawati Sukarnoputri signed into law an autonomy package that included comprehensive regulations on establishing Shariah courts and Shariah bylaws. Based on that legislation that was drafted, discussed, and approved in Jakarta, Aceh established its first Sharia court in 2003.

As I am writing this article, Sharia law has been implemented in the Indonesian province of Aceh for more than 15 years. Under the law No.44/2001, Sharia was officially promulgated as part of special autonomy status granted by the central government of Indonesia to end the Aceh conflict. At first, many Acehnese also perceived the implementation of Sharia would be the answer to the pervasive corruption and injustice spread during the conflict. It came together with a longing for the glorious past of Aceh. The Acehnese elites who supported the Sharia proposal had actively tried to convince people that in precolonial times Islamic law had already been implemented in Aceh, and its modern absence was only due to the impact of European colonialism (Ali Muhammad 2003: 327, cf. Basri 2010: 271; Hefner 2011).

With the establishment of the Office of Islamic Sharia (*Dinas Syariat Islam*), Sharia Courts (*Mahkamah Syariat*) and the Sharia Police (*Wilayatul Hisbah*), all Sharia instruments were complete and ready to

perform. The result has been a number of bylaws (officially called *qanun*) promoting ‘correct’ Islamic behaviour, forbidding non-Sunni practices and beliefs, making punishable acts like gambling (*maisir*) and the consumption of alcoholic beverages (*khamr*), giving local authorities the power to act upon and punish illicit sexual relations (*khalwat*), and introducing corporal punishment with the use of rattan cane in public.

However, it was not until after the tsunami and the end of the political conflict that the new laws and institutions became widely visible and active in the province. The Sharia authority publicly caned its first Sharia violator in 2005. Why in 2005 and not during the previous five years? Many insiders observers assumed that it had to do with another catastrophe that hit the region and its subsequent development (see for example in Kloos 2014; Samuels 2009). The tsunami that struck many Southeast Asian countries on 26 December 2004 hit the Aceh province hardest. The tsunami wave killed almost 300,000 Acehnese in less than one hour after the powerful earthquakes and caused tremendous, long-lasting suffering in the coastal areas of Aceh. The force of natural disaster finally revealed larger social and political problem of Aceh, which had previously been hidden from international view (Good et al. 2008; Good & Good 2013; Samuels 2012; Good, Good & Grayman 2015). Within a month of the tsunami, peace negotiation were resumed, which led to a peace agreement being signed in Helsinki, Finland, on August 15, 2005.

The province that was totally closed off to foreigners prior to the tsunami was suddenly opened to the wider world. At the same time, the intensity of Sharia law implementation dramatically increased. The fear of foreign influence, conversion to other religions, and radical ideas began to develop (or be incited) along with the reconstruction and rehabilitation projects in Aceh (Kloos 2014, 2015). The upholding of morality and waging of war on all forms of immorality became the main agenda of Sharia authority. Through local regulation (*Qanun* or ‘*Perda*,’ *Peraturan Daerah*), Sharia matters have been institutionalized into a government agency. More Sharia Police were recruited, and they have finally been integrated into civilian police units (Satpol PP) in order to increase the agency’s force to intervene. Those are the officials who nowadays go on patrols to guard against anything considered a threat to Sharia implementation.

Furthermore, the peace agreement between the GAM and the Indonesian Government successfully transformed former members of

the combatants into administrators, constructing a new circle of elites. This transformation also created opportunities and new spaces for economic and socio-political competition and contestation. GAM transformed and brought its former members into a local political party, known today as Partai Aceh (The Aceh Party). This party won general elections in 2006 and 2012, and now occupying most of political positions within the local government of Aceh. Ironically, many former GAM members who previously refused to accept the Sharia proposal are now supporting the implementation of Sharia laws. They found “Sharia” useful as a means of political control, and today they have extended its force into a more complex ensemble of legal practices and institutions. After the peace deal, the conditions of military emergency returned under the guise of Sharia. Spying, raids, detention and all kinds of prohibitions employed during the military emergency have been re-implemented by Sharia authorities. The current political situation in Aceh after the armed conflict might resonate to what has been discussed in many anthropological studies about the irony in the “postcolony,” where power inequalities continue to persist in a host of different ways as the former colonized elites embody the role of colonizer (Mbembe 1986, 1992; Comaroff & Comaroff 2006; Ferguson 2007; Good et al. 2008; Steedly 2013).

A number of new controversial regulations in the name of Sharia have been endorsed and executed by many GAM former combatants, those who have become popular local political figures in the last decade. In 2010, the local government of West Aceh issued a *qanun* forbidding women to wear jeans and ‘tight’ clothing. This regulation was subsequently followed by the more odd *qanun* issued by the regent of South Aceh, Husein Yusuf, who strangely prohibited male civil servants from having mouthaches. In the North, the Mayor of Lhokseumawe, Suaidi Yahya, in 2011 promulgated his own Sharia law banning women from straddling motorcycles. The nature of Sharia laws seem to vary arbitrarily from region to region within the province. The city of Banda Aceh and Meulaboh, West Aceh, have restricted any form of outdoor and indoor performing arts that do not strictly conform to Sharia law. To hold an event or an art performance in Aceh requires passing through three hoops to obtain three different permissions; from the municipality, from the Sharia Office, and from the Aceh Ulama Council. Failure to obtain permission from any one of these may result in the event being declared illegal and able to be shut down. Moreover,

the implementation of a night curfew in several areas, such as North, East, Central Aceh and Banda Aceh, play a large part in extinguishing enthusiasm for the performing arts across the region.

It is important to note that from the early days of its implementation, dissenting voices to the state project of Sharia have emerged and come from various segments of society. They might vary by education, political views, and gender. From a legal point of view, attempts to enforce Islamic laws in Indonesia have almost always resulted in conflict among competing systems of law and customary or civil law (Bowen 2003; Salim 2008; Hefner 2008). From political point of view, I have indicated above that before the GAM leaders signed the peace agreement with the Indonesian government, they used to be a leading voice to reject the Sharia proposal. They also received supports from some elements in the Acehnese society. From civil society point of view, there were two groups critical to the central government's Sharia proposal. I divided them into two groups because they have different visions on the subject matter. The first group was dominated by the traditionalist Muslim scholars, known as the *dayah Ulama*. Tgk Nuruzzahri or Waled Nu, was one of the influential Aceh ulama who once told in a public seminar that the Sharia (in Acehnese, *syari'at*) applied now in Aceh actually means '*syari 'ab*' (Acehnese slang, *lit.* look for a free meal), a project to feed the government officers. He made fun of it by using that local term and called the proposal was no more than '*tipu Sukarno*' or Sukarno's trick to prevaricate the Acehnese people. He referred to the Sukarno's policy to end the DI/TII movement in 1950s where the central government also granted Sharia in order to win the heart of the Acehnese. However, the *dayah Ulama*'s views on the current government's interpretations of Sharia have always been ambivalent. While they urge the local government of Aceh not to “play” with a partial understanding of Islamic law, they also demand Sharia should be implemented stronger and thoroughly (*kaffah*), and ask the government to consul with them before passing the regulations. In other words, they would have been supportive to the implementation of the law had they were involved to determine what constitutes Sharia in the regulations (Fuadi, 2001).

Furthermore, there was another group comprised human rights activists and university intellectuals. They rejected Sharia proposal on the basis of human rights understanding. Many of them were aware that Sharia will be transformed into and back up by the military forces to

expand their control upon public aspiration (Sjamsuddin-Ishak 2002). Critical reviews on the Sharia proposal were raised by some Acehese intellectuals such as Fuad Mardhatillah (2009), Affan Ramly (2010), Husni Mubarak A. Latief (2010), Teuku Harits Muzanni, Asrizal Luthfi (2011) and Teuku Muhammad Jafar Sulaiman. (2011). In 2009, a significant number of human right activists established a joint forum to be named *Jaringan Masyarakat Sipil Peduli Syariat* - JMSPS (Civil Society's Network Concerning Sharia). This forum comprises several local NGOs, such as the Human Rights-NGO coalition, Aceh Legal Aid Foundation (LBH), Relawan Perempuan untuk Kemanusiaan (women volunteers for humanitarian issues), Flower Aceh, KKTGA, Komunitas Tikar Pandan, Aceh Judicial & Monitoring Institute, Violet Grey, Women Voice Radio, Gender Working Group, SEIA, Fatayat Nahdatul Ulama, Sekolah Menulis Dokarim, Kontras Aceh, Center for Human Rights Studies-Unsyiah, Sri Ratu Safiatuddin Foundation and others. In 2010 the JMSPS group successfully pushed governor Irwandi Yusuf to postpone the implementation of the *qanun Jinayah* (Islamic Penal Law).

Broadly speaking, since the Sharia laws in Aceh has been implemented through the machinery of an inefficient and unprofessional state with a long legacy of corruption, manipulation, and authoritarianism, it certainly has not been immune to resistance and contestations (Feener 2015; Idria 2015). It has become more visible within the last two years, but still far cry from becoming a movement to overthrow state power.

D. On Sharia Contestation & the Function of Humor for the Less Powerful

Power and resistance, according to Foucault (1978), are correlative concepts. The possibility for resistance to emerge always goes hand in hand with histories of groups suffering from power imbalance. Foucault also believes that power is not merely sustained by violence and coercion. The ability of a regime to make people believe in it or to force them to act as if they believed in it lies not only in coercive power but also in authority and the capacity to monopolize authority. Theoretically speaking, just like power, resistance has become ubiquitous, and there is no consensus on what the term actually means. No matter how far one travels back in the history of resistance studies, the terminology has always been problematic, with significant contradictions and disagreements; this remains true in more recent texts (see for example

from Foucault 1978; de Certeau 1980; Scott 1985, 1991; Bourdieu 1991; Wedeen 1999; Hollander & Einwohner 2004; Seymour 2006; Duncome 2008; Butcher & Velayutham 2009; Camps-Febrer 2012; Medina 2013).

Many scholars from a great many disciplinary perspectives across the social sciences, ranging from history to anthropology, have been involved in resistance studies. Efforts to conceptualize resistance have been enormous and rigorous, from choosing “whether any given act fits into a fixed box called resistance” (Ortner 1995: 175) to how it is formed from relatively organized and fixed movement to less institutionalized and more everyday forms of resistance. In both a concealed manner or an open confrontation, there are many forms of articulations (see for example in Comaroff 1985; Abu Lughod 1986; Brown 1996; Kastrinou-Theodoropoulou 2009), practices (Tilly 1977; Scott 1985, Adas 1986; Scott 1990; Ong 1987, 2013; Guha 1997; Reed-Danahay 1993; Collins 2009) and significations (Stoler 1986; Cooper 1992; Hoffman 1999; Seymour 2009; Lugg 2010), seen as the complex network of resistance actions. Regarding everyday forms of resistance, we are also equipped with a plenty of useful concepts from E.P Thompson’s “counter-theatre” (1993), W.F. Warheim’s “counterpoint,” and James C. Scott’s “weapons of the weak” (1985), to Václav Havel’s “power of the powerless” (1985 [1979]). Still, this wide range of studies has shown that resistance is a complicated and heterogenous phenomenon.

The history of Aceh is full of stories of oppressions and of fierce resistance, especially against any infringements on its freedom to arrange its own affairs. I wish to make clear at this stage that when I refer to the word resistance in this present study, I do not mean “resistance” strictly in the sense of organized and relatively fixed movement to overthrow the government. As I have shown above, there have been enough studies concerning that type of resistance overwhelmingly attributed the Acehnese almost to the point that one might say that ‘where there are Acehnese there is resistance,’ pointing to centuries of Acehnese armed struggles in combating colonial powers and a series of armed revolts against the Republic.

In seeking to map out how Acehnese Muslims “humorous” experience in contesting a new authoritarian religious regime, namely the Sharia state, I follow James C. Scott’s (1985, 1992, 1996), rather than seeing “resistance as organization,” I choose to look at less visible, every-day forms of resistance articulated in various modes of

articulations, as suggested by Scott, like “foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage.” Some Sharia resistors explored in my study are indeed adopting defensive strategies (i.e., subversion rather than confrontation) and often performed their criticism in unconventional manners. I paid attention to the line between “public vs hidden transcripts.” This is the line where Scott sees the battle for “testing the limits,” where subordinates, unsure of dominants’ effective powers, might bring hidden transcripts to a public sphere (Scott, 1990: p.192; see also Camps-Febrer 2012). Hidden transcripts are usually opposed to the public display of language, rituals and behaviors that a group or individual performs in front of others.⁵

James Scott’s concepts “weapons of the weak” and “hidden transcripts” have been foundational in theorizing resistance in the discipline of anthropology. However, in some cases applying the concepts “weapons of the weak” and “hidden transcripts” to attribute Acehese counter-actions against the Sharia authority would have been problematic, since criticism to the state project of Sharia has not been merely voiced by less powerful people and not always hidden from public. Instead they already became visible as a variety of more powerful groups have already involved. With the increasing openness of public discourse in post-disaster and post-conflict Aceh, critiques of the Sharia authority’s arrogance and hypocrisy spread beyond coffee house conversations to take a prominent position in popular media discourse (Idria 2013; Feener 2015). Furthermore, there is an intrinsic relationship between the sovereign and audience which makes the regime able to continue exercise its power through ceremony and the spread of violence. People who mock and laugh at the Sharia authority in many cases are the same people who deliberately attend ceremony of spectacle punishment.

This is understandable if one would accept the logic that the contemporary Sharia regime is a distinctive regime established in “the postcolony,” to use the words of Achille Mbembe, which “seeks to institutionalize itself, in order to achieve its legitimacy and hegemony in the form of a fetish” (Mbembe 1992: 4). But, by having this logic I should then be more specific about what I mean by resistance within this study. The term resistance here refers to a distinctive situation that arises out of encounters and interactions and derive from “illicit cohabitation” between rulers and the ruled who happen to share the same living space – a mode of relationship that Mbembe has called it as

“mutual zombification” (Mbembe, *ibid*). A distinctive situation unintentionally continues to create amusing situations. Condition best described in Anna Tsing’s terminology (2000) of “friction.” Friction is not just about slowing things down, but “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference as they arise out of encounters and interactions” (Tsing 2000: 4-6). Friction can be something very trivial, as she put, “it can be the fly in the elephant nose”.

Here, in this very context, the complexity of history, Islam and the construction of Acehnese identity which always goes hand in hand has no doubt contributed to a more complicated power relation between the current regime and its subject. A complex situation that makes sense when one thinks of how Acehnese identity is so entwined with Islam that critical voices to the Sharia project in general are subdued due to the fear of being labeled anti-Islam. Therefore, just as Sigmund Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1963 [1907]) claimed, in this very condition humor has become “a survivalist response to the vicissitudes of life” in Aceh.⁶

Henk Driessen (2015) points out that the terms humor, joking, and laughter are often used interchangeably and are part of the semantic field of the comic, which in turn belongs to the domain of expressive culture. There is no single acceptable definition of humor, but scholars generally agree that it revolves around a sense of the incongruous or ludicrous (Driessen 2015: 416). Stuart Hall (1997) points out that humorous strategies are powerful in their capacity to “unfix” dominant meanings through subversive satire and parody, and to affix new meanings that destabilize the underlying assumptions of the stereotype.

There have been numerous anthropological studies about the use of humor in repressive political settings challenging oppression in a different way than traditional resistance (Pi-Sunyer 1977; Johansen 1991; Stokker 2001; Sorensen 2008; Kazarian 2011). Some researchers dealing with the sociology of power and social movements have described laughter, political humor, and the like as creative reactions to the greatest concentration of power in society, seen as a sublimation of aggression, a form of political resistance also used for therapeutic ends and for social commentary and critique, and hence a safe release for aggressiveness against a superior force (Schutz 1977; Apte 1985; Billig 2005; Davies 2007; Berdaneh 2011; Wadeen 2011; Zimbardo 2014;). There are also a few writers who found comedy at the heart of state

power (see for example Bakhtin 1984; Furnivall, Mbembe 1992, 2003; Zizek 1993; Rutherford 2012).⁷

Given its specific context, both historical and material, I argue that the form of humor under the post-colonial Sharia regime has a far greater personal, political, intellectual, and historical importance than is the case with sarcasm and satire performed in traditional or democratic societies. The fetishization of power through ceremony and display of symbols as well as the spread of fear through violence and unpredictability directed by mediocre state apparatuses make possible carnivalesque encounters to happen and allow the oppressed to make fun of the absurdity of their situation. Mocking and laughter are parts of these rituals. Laughter, coming from examples I collected in my preliminary research, is often embodied in carnivalesque situations where smiling or laughing came together with feeling uneasy about smiling or laughing. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) has described that the carnival is a period of time where normal rules do not apply, the social distance between the high and the lowly is diminished, the mighty mocks and “the world [is] turned upside down.”

There is a parallel between the jokes told under the Sharia regime in Aceh and the carnival behavior of medieval times when the rites and rituals of the Church were burlesqued in Bakhtin’s *Rabelais*. But I also argue that Bakhtinian ideas do not equally apply to all inherently amusing situations in Aceh today. It is clearly related to popular protest and resistance but the nature of the relationship is very problematic. Thus, rather than looking the obscenity and the grotesque merely at “non-official” cultures, the province of ordinary people, again I tend to follow Achille Mbembe to see the grotesque and the obscene as two essential elements intrinsic to all system of domination in the postcolony, including under the Sharia regime of Aceh.

Like other regimes in “the postcolony,” which are characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, the Sharia regime of Aceh has so far effectively adopted and translated Sharia as a distinct set of cultural repertoires and powerfully evocative concepts. Yet the regime’s aim to discipline the population and to “organize” people’s desire is far from successful, to underline it once again, because it runs through the machinery of an inefficient and unprofessional state. Mbembe in his study also introduces the term “illicit cohabitation” and “mutual zombification” to describe forms of postcolonial relationship. It is “a

relationship made fraught by the very fact of the *commandement* and its ‘subjects’ having to share the same living space” (Mbembe 1992: 4). By recognizing these two categories one can also avoid to always describe the postcolonial relationship in term of a classic definition of resistance or collaboration, rather the grotesque irrationality of power. Thus, it is the hallmark of grotesque humor.

E. Sarcasm and Satire: Shaming the Powerful

The story from the caning stage I recall in the beginning of this article provides us an example how the effect of spectacle punishment reenacted by the contemporary Sharia authority went not to the direction it aimed, shaming. The action of the woman offender on the caning stage, through dance and *selfie*, and the audience who shouted and laughed at her and the authority arguably did not reach that quality. Rather, it was perceived just like a performance. The offender action was certainly not to tell a joke to anyone who laughed at her. Instead, she was sarcastic as in an unexpected way she ridiculed both the authority and the audience. Taking selfie was her satirical weapon to mock their inability to inflict shame on her. Of course, for an ethnographer, there is also a strong moral component to take.

Since Acehnese identity is so entwined with Islam, counter-narratives to the state project of Sharia in general are subdued due to the fear of being labelled anti-Islam (see my work and Ichwan, 2011). Many individuals critical to the implementation of Sharia tend to adopt defensive strategy, subversion rather than confrontation. Pretending to follow while disobeying the laws and the authority. In many cases their actions very much embedded in sarcasm and satire resulted in conflict and competing systems.

Counter action to the taken by many people were very much embedded in what the locals termed as *ulok* or *meu-ulok* (lit. mocking to make fun). At first glance, *ulok* might be equivalent to sarcasm and satire, terms conceptualized in humor and interpersonal communication studies. Fine & Martin (1990) note that sarcasm is a distinctive style of discourse, as a societal form of biting communication, often involving the opposite of what is meant, that is “inversion.” Sarcasm announces a position, the attitude of the rhetor toward the target, but may miss its target with an unsympathetic or naive audience. Satire, as they continue, more than most humor, has the reputation of being subtle, so subtle that many might miss it. Its rhetorical force often overlaps with that of

sarcasm. Satire, at its roots, is profoundly moral. According to Waller (2006) the word “satire” from the ancient Greek *satyr*, the mythical drunk, “hedonistic or otherwise naughty man-goat.” Unlike sarcasm, it is not necessarily biting or hostile. It always has a moral component. The satirist is acutely aware of the gaps between the way that things are and the way they should be (Elliot, 1978). For the locals *ulok* is often inspired within unusual political circumstances that allow them to deal with the absurdity of their situation.

In 2009, Putroe Sejati, a queer community in Banda Aceh, hosted a controversial contest called *Pemilihan Ratu Waria Aceh* (Aceh Queer Queen Festival). The contestants wore proper Muslim dress codes as instructed by Sharia law. The organizer also followed the official protocol to include Quranic recitations and prayers for the opening and the closing of the event. As the event was open to the Banda Aceh public, Islamist groups were subsequently outraged and demanded the dissolution of Putroe Sejati. However, they could not stop the event because the organizer was able to show the letter of approval from the ulama council and none of these queer contestants attending the event were wearing “inappropriate” dress. Provoked by angered Islamist groups, the Aceh Ulama Council (MPU) told the press that they were fooled by Putroe Sejati members who falsified the permit of the event. According to Tgk Muslim Ibrahim, a leading figure of the Aceh ulama council and the official that signed the letter of approval for the event, Putroe Sejati actually asked for permission only to organize a charity concert, without ever mentioning the queer contest in the letter.

Furthermore, the public profile of Aceh’s punk community has evolved considerably over the past years. As the community grew and became more visible, the authority declared the phenomenon as deviant. The government of Banda Aceh thus placed the ‘problem’ of punks squarely in the context of the implementation of Islamic law. Since 2011 the government has launched a moral project called *pembinaan* “to re-educate” the punks in order to bring them back to the path of Islam (Idria, 2015). The state Sharia police regularly crack down, and repeatedly stormed the city park where the youngsters usually gathered, rounding up anyone wearing punk dress styles, mohawk hair, tattoos and chains. In many occasions the Acehnese punks fought back against the officials, resulting in open clashes. But, they youngsters also showed peculiar, if not subversive, ways in undermining the authority as they keep going to gather in the city park next to the Grand Mosque of

Baiturrahman, which is the iconic and religious landmark of the city of Banda Aceh. The punk members, most of them also wanted to show that they are practicing Muslims. They often join the prayers at the grand mosque while still wearing their punk clothing, by intention in direct confrontation with the more conservative members of the mosque.

Not only performed by a certain limited group, occasionally, there was also a mode of spontaneous action where a large number of people involved in disobeying the Sharia law in hilarious ways. The New Year's Eve has become an annual comical event for the Acehnese people, especially in the city of Banda Aceh. Every year since 2010, on 31 December the government of Banda Aceh and the Ulama Council (MPU) would repeatedly release a joint announcement to prohibit people from celebrating New Year's Eve, on religious ground. The authority ordered the *Wilayat al-Hisbah* (the Sharia Police) to seal off the beach nearby Banda Aceh in order to prevent the unlawful acts of those celebrating the event. Fireworks and trumpets sold for the New Year's Eve celebration would be seized, the government announced. However, as it happened every year, at midnight of the New Year Eve fireworks would explode in the air and trumpets would be sounded everywhere. Thousands of people would walk, driving their cars and motorcycles, blowing trumpets and illuminating fireworks to the sky of the city of Banda Aceh. This kind of situation has been evidently not planned as people came out of their own volition to join the celebrations. I witnessed several moments when the Sharia Police patrolling the city lost their power and were not able to prevent the crowds from disobeying their restrictions. Many people would even drive their vehicles on the right side of the city road rather than following the rule in which one has to do it in reverse. When confronted by the police people would argue that they were driving in such a way following Islamic values which prefer the right side rather than the left side. People also argued that trumpet should not be banned on the New Year's Eve, because there is the angel of the trumpet in Islamic eschatology. It was, above all, satirical argument. Many people, mostly youngsters, often burst out laughing after arguing with the officials.

The above hilarious examples show that in many cases the way people of Aceh deal with the new regime of conduct prefer to avoid confrontative actions. Instead, they articulate, sometimes negotiate, and perform their counter views against the government interpretation of

Sharia in ways that require one to grasp and to understand them beyond conventional notion. Often embedded in humor, they continue to contest and destabilize the power of the Sharia regime.⁸

F. Concluding Remark

As Martin Sorensen has coined “looking more closely at the unusual, we can often get more information about the less unusual” (Sorensen, 2008: 169), here I provide a counter-narrative to dominant media portrayals of Acehnese, often as the most fanatic Muslim community in Indonesia and supportive in total to the local government project of Sharia. My study first show that despite the more aggressive Sharia project directed by the government to have a total control on its population, Acehnese attitudes toward the implementation of the law have shown otherwise. More and more people have become more open to express their critical views challenging the implementation of that religious law. Besides, there are some segments of Acehnese society who continue to destabilize the government project of Sharia in more subtle ways. In many ways they are hilarious.

Anthropologists argue that comedy and humor may be used in order to break tension, to create a sense of community, to build solidarity through in-group inclusion and out-group exclusion, as a method of coping with injustice or trauma, as a survival tactic, as a form of political resistance, for therapeutic ends, and for social commentary and critique (for example in Apte 1985; Billig 2005; Davies 2007; Zimbardo 2014;). As Stuart Hall (1997) notes humorous strategies are powerful in the capacity to “unfix” dominant meanings through subversive satire and parody, and affix new meanings that destabilize the underlying assumptions of the stereotype. However, this subject has been ignored in contemporary study of Aceh, and Islam. Attending to comedy and anecdote as “unintended effects” of the implementation of Sharia, my study offers a different lens on what Sharia means in everyday life. Understanding counter views on Sharia beyond the old notion of resistance, I found the concepts of both “illicit cohabitation” and “mutual zombification” introduced by Achille Mbembe are useful to describe the logic, the dynamic and what cause the unstable relationship between the dominant and the subordinate in a post colonial setting like Aceh. Having this logic made possible for me to understand tensions, derive from actions and articulations toward Sharia regulations, between the authority and state subject that may be

bothering processes of rule and marking limits of sovereign power as it is performed. But at the same time, these processes continue to productively create metaphors and keep always open for us possibilities to grasp the meaning of everyday practices and the constitution of society. My work, above all, is timely and challenges dominant narratives in popular media that portray Aceh as the most conservative region in the Archipelago. Every time there is an incident relating to Sharia law, it becomes magnified in the media, contributing to an un-nuanced view of the region's politics. I strongly argue that Aceh is in fact a vibrant open society with a complex arrangement of internal political divergences.

Endnotes:

1 Using a different angle, I have discussed public caning in Aceh as the state's highly visual politics of re-education through performance in my article “Two Stages for Performance in Aceh: From StateConflict to *Syariah* Politics”, in Barbara Hatley & Brett Hough (eds.), *Performing Contemporary Indonesia: Celebrating Identity, Constructing Community*, Leiden - Brill & KITLV (2015), pp. 167-181

2 “Saya lapar, belum makan siang, *ngapain* nonton hukuman yang hipokrit kayak gini” (fieldnotes transcript 12/06/2015)

3 “Islam nggak *ngajarin* bikin malu orang di depan umum” (fieldnotes transcript 12/06/2015)

4 In our 2011 collaborative research, Moch Nur Ichwan and I study offer an alternative bottom up approach in comparison to other works offering top down perspective of Sharia. Our research is published as part of the IRP report entitled *Regime Change, Democracy & Islam. The Case of Indonesia* Leiden: Leiden University (2013)

5 According to James Scott hidden transcripts are those acts of dissent that occur within a space and among a group of people that share the same position in a given relation of dominance. These transcripts did not usually reach the other side of the power relationship because of the reaction they would entail (Scott 1990: 196).

6 Freud sees humor arises out of internal suppression of subjects. He locates the source of humor and comedy in the *id* which is in a constant struggle with the regulatory force of super-ego (Freud 1907, cf Kohlenberger 2015: 135).

7 The vast majority of anthropologists working on Indonesia have neglected humor as a research topic. Some early anthropologists studied humor from the perspective of folklore or media performance, but rarely as a resource for cultural analysis (see for example in Siegel 1979 & 1986; Sherzer & Sherzer 1987; Boellstorff 2005). In many ethnographic accounts, humor is not even mentioned in spite of the fact that it is a finely calibrated barometer of the preoccupations shared by members of a society or group.

8 There is always the possibility that sarcasm and satire can contribute to destabilize and undermine the authoritarian powers (see for example in Kazarian 2010; CampsFebrer, 2012 on recent studies concerning the impact of humor in the Arab Spring). Majken Jul Sorensen's study entitled “Humor as a Serious Strategy of

Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression” published in *Peace & Change*, Vol. 33, No.2 (2008) focuses on an oppositional movement in Serbia called Otpor. This extraordinary study brought an example how the impact of humor could bring down the oppressive regime of Slobodan Milosevic.

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