

‘WE ARE FROM THE SAME ANCESTORS’: CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORAY ACEH SINGKIL

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Abstract

The following Paper discusses the Muslim-Christian relations in Aceh Singkil Regency as well as the process of religious identity formation in the context of the debate over the Islamic Sharia in Aceh. First of all I will present the overview of the socio-political context of the regulations of Islamic jurisprudence in Aceh and the position of non-Muslims in such regulations. Next, I will trace the impact of the regulations on the format of the Muslim-Christian relations. Based on the Goffman theory of dramaturgy, this paper found that Muslim-Christian relations in Singkil were a complex narrative, often opposite between the appearance of the front stage and the backstage. Amid suspicions of the majority of the Aceh Singkil Muslims and the local Government of the existence of Christians, Inter-faith communities at the grassroots level are precisely trying to build harmony and co-existence. I conclude that the consciousness about the similarities of ethnic origins has so far contributed effectively to suppressing the conflict between the two religions in Aceh Singkil.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Muslim-Christian Relations, Aceh Singkil

INTRODUCTION

Aceh Singkil is an inalienable land of the society of Pakpak Suak Boang inhabited the majority of Pakpak society and other newcomers. The Pakpak people living in Aceh Singkil are mostly Muslims, but there are also Christians who worship at the Pakpak Dairi Christian Protestant Church (GKPPD). In the daily life of the society, both Muslims and Christians live side by side in custom events as well as in other forms of social life. They come from the same tribe, Pakpak Silima Suak. The current people's lives especially the Christian community is disturbed by the behavior of a handful of people who are supported by the Singkil District Government to seal in the church so that it can no longer be used as a place of worship (Letter of GKPPD to Aceh Provincial Police Chief, No. 115/PP/V/2012, dated May 5, 2012).

Historically, there are two great Islamic scholars from this area, namely Sheikh Abdurrauf Singkil and Hamza Fansury. We don't know if Aceh Singkil becomes

the target of Christianization to weaken the influence of the two scholars so that this place can be used as “the Vatican area”. I am sure that Singkil becomes the target of the Christianization, because geographically this district has a cultural and political border with Central Tapanuli and Sibolga: the Centre of Christianity in the region. Singkil also borders West Pakpak Dairi, which also is a Christian Center. So our problems are very serious. Many churches here have given us a blow. (Interview with Hambalisyah Sinaga, Chairman of the FPI Singkil, January 08, 2013).

The above account is one of the portraits of Muslim-Christian relations in contemporary Singkil. There are opposing diametral viewpoints between the two sides in looking at each other. The Batak people believe that Aceh Singkil is their ancestral land, although the majority of the people of Batak have now become Muslim, and partly Christian. Batak people think the harmony between Muslim and Christian communities in Aceh Singkil have lately been disturbed by the provocation of a group of people who unfortunately had the support of state authorities or local government. On the contrary, the Muslims, represented by Chairman of the FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) Singkil, see Christians as a threat because they intended to make the Singkil as Christian base. The widespread increase of the Christian population and the number of churches in Singkil are believed to be the indications. But interestingly, despite the above difference, the two groups encounter a sense that “each feels threatened by the other (Mujiburrahman, 2008), and the fact the majority of those are aware that they are the same descents (Interviewed by Rahma, 2013).

In contrast to the above narrative which implies tension of relation, the academic construction of the relations between Muslims and Christians in Aceh today often shows a relative harmony. Safrilsyah, for example, said that Muslim-Christian relations in Aceh are harmonious and the majority of non-Muslims are in support of the implementation of Islamic Sharia in Aceh (Safrilsyah, 2012). Non-Muslims were initially worried by the Islamic jurisprudence, but after witnessing the implementation, the concerns have now disappeared (Marzuki, 2010, p. 165). However, discrimination against Christians is obvious. Restrictions on the construction of the church, demands that they respect and adapt to the regulation on Islamic code of clothing, or restriction of access to justice for non-Muslims in the public sphere of education that frequently appear in the mass media proves that the academic construction of Christian-Muslim relations in Aceh are not as simple as expected. Social context faced by Christians in Aceh somehow affects their collective identity formation process.

This paper show that the construction of the Muslim-Christian relations is a

complex dynamics. The focus of the writing is the process of the Christian-Muslim identity formation in Singkil in the context of the debate on contemporary Islamic jurisprudence in Aceh. I will show that a certain group of mainly Muslims in Singkil attempts to draw a line between the collective identity of Muslim-Christian, while the rural community there is struggling to build harmonious relations between different religious communities. To sustain this argument I would use the dramaturgy concept that Erving Goffman presented (1959) in tracing the dynamics at the front stage and backstage coloring the everyday dynamics between Muslims and Christians in Aceh Singkil Regency.

Singkil was chosen as a subject of study for several reasons. First, although it is not a region with the largest Christian population, Muslim-Christian relations in the Singkil has been the most dynamic in the last few years. Second, the sealing of more than 20 churches in Singkil in mid 2012, became a national discussion regarding the relation of Islam and Christianity Indonesia. Singkil was noted as a region with the largest number of events of sealing of church conducted simultaneously. Third, the phenomenon of the construction of the front stage of the Muslim-Christian relations in this District is in contrast to the everyday situations that occur (back stage) in the community. While most of the elite Muslims portray the image of sentiment and suspicion against Christians in Singkil, Muslim-Christian grass-roots build harmony and co-existence.

In this paper I will elaborate on the conceptual framework used. Then, I will present an overview of the implementation of Islamic Sharia law in Aceh as well as the position of non-Muslims in the Islamic Sharia discourse. Next I will elaborate the impact of the implementation of Islamic jurisprudence with respect to the establishment of the Muslim-Christian relations in the everyday practice in Singkil. This section will elaborate the tension and conflict that have occurred in recent decades. Next I will elaborate on the everyday practice of Muslims-Christians in rural Singkil in trying to build a mutual co-existence and harmony. In the end, this paper concludes that due to their common origin, Christians and Muslims in rural Singkil effectively overcame religious conflicts from spreading in the area.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is important to elaborate here the dramaturgy theory of Erving Goffman used in the following discussion. Goffman emphasized that self does not belong to the actor, but rather as a product of the interaction between the actor and the audience dramatically. Self is a dramatic effect emerging ... from

a scene presented (Goffman, 1959, p. 253). Because self is a product of the interaction of dramatic, it is fragile against the chaos that occurs during a play (Mitzal, 2001). Goffman's dramaturgy is concerned with the prevention and mitigation of such disturbances. Although the set of his discussions focused on dramaturgical contingency, Goffman pointed out that most of the play was successful. The result is that in the daily atmosphere, self is staunchly aligned with the play, and he "seemed" to be derived from the showman (Ritzer, 2012, pp. 637-638).

Goffman's theory of dramaturgy talks about the front stage and the back stage. The front section is part of a play that is generally served in a somewhat formal manner and to define the situation for the people who watched it. Goffman argued that since people in general are trying to present an image of themselves that they play which is supposed to be ideal at the front of the stage, inevitably they feel they must conceal various things. The back is the place where facts suppressed in the front part of the stage appear, or various types of informal action can be seen. A back stage is usually inseparable from the frontstage, but also isolate from each other. The actor can expect that there is no audience member can see them in the back stage (Ritzer, 2012, pp. 638-642).

Goffman's discussion about the front and back stage is likely to have implications that anything 'hidden' expresses the real feelings in those who play the role 'in the front stage.' Giddens (2004, pp. 154-155) said that if the players on stages hide their real self behind masks they wear, the social world would constitute a mere emptiness. Giddens offered a way out that the differentiation between the front stage and backstage as a division between the containment (enclosure) aspects of oneself and his disclosure. The back may be a 'performance on stage' as happens on a regular life activities and ordinary decency (Giddens, 2004, pp. 155-160). While the front stage is the appearance with a scenario, the back stage allows individuals to express themselves as a social agent (p. 160) and to break away from the restrictions that apply on the front stage. As written by Geertz (1980), the reality of the world is basically about the drama world with all the applicable rules of the game in it.

In the case of Muslim-Christian relations in Singkil, when viewed between the appearance on the front stage, is visible in the way Muslims position the Christians in the regulation of Islamic jurisprudence. In addition, the front stage condition can also be seen from the attitude of the religious social organizations or the elite Aceh Muslims who encourage restraint of Christians. However, according to Goffman, stage appearance often is not the actual reality. The actual reality is precisely visible on the back stage. The back stage is the everyday dynamics of both communities at the grassroots level.

Goffman (1963, p. 8) affirmed that a search for the dynamics of everyday life in the grassroots level is very useful for understanding the social order in the community. Social order for Goffman is the consequence of any set of morals that regulates the way in which the person pursues objectives.

ACEH AS THE STAGE FOR ISLAMIC SHARIA

The stage play about Aceh has only one ornament: Islam. Islam has been a core feature of Aceh politics and society since at least the twelfth century when archeological evidence at Kuta Lubhok in Aceh Besar suggested the existence of an Islamic community in the south of capital Banda Aceh (McKinnon, 2006, p. 30). By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Aceh had attained a period of imperial greatness marked by its political and spiritual dominance in the region. By 1950 it was known as “the intellectual and spiritual center of Islam in the Malay world” which reached its height in the seventeenth century (Syed M. Nuguib Al-Attas in Riddell 2006, p. 40). The strategic importance of Aceh as the Islamic center of Southeast Asia, indeed as *Serambi Mekkah* (the terrace of Mecca), during this time, reflected its flourishing reputation for Islamic scholarly excellence and the dynamism of doctrinal debates. The latter had tremendous impact on religious groups in Aceh and the rest of the region (Riddell 2006, pp. 43-49).

The Dutch occupation of Aceh in 1873 shaped what would become Aceh’s core identity feature, i.e. an Islamic identity based on a passionate and vigorous reaction against non-believers, oppression and colonization. The “holy war of faith” (militant jihad or *Prang Sabil*) is resonant in its history. It was first pursued by Acehnese Sultans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries against the Portuguese in Melaka, including non-Bataks, the Dutch from 1873 to 1930s, the Japanese from 1941 to 1945, and against Javanese oppression starting 1945 to the present (Milallos, 2007, p. 292).

Within an independent Indonesia, Aceh officially became an autonomous province in 1950. This was abolished in 1951 following mounting political tensions. Then Aceh Governor Daud Beureu’eh quickly seized the opportunity to launch a Darul Islam military campaign against the central Government (Aspinall, 2006, pp. 153-156). The justification for the revolt as *jihad* (holy war) was two-fold: to establish an over-arching Pancasila ideology, and to demonize those who oppose the first objective as enemies and thus are *kafir* and apostates (Aspinall 2006, p. 154). As a response, starting with Soekarno’s government and most notably during Soeharto’s New Order, the military followed sustained counter-insurgency campaigns. This has resulted in Aceh’s systematic political and economic retardation, and the strengthening of its

peculiar brand of identity. In 1976, the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM, or the free Aceh Movement) was born. Demands for the establishment of Islamic state became synonymous with calls for political independence (Milallos, 2007, p. 292).

As the great economic crisis that struck Asia in 1997-1998, the Government of the new order fell and the reform movement hit Indonesia. One of the effects of the reform is the advent of an Islamist group, who for more than three decades suffered repression of the new order, then suddenly played an important role in the transition process. In the case of Aceh, opening the Pandora's box of democracy had an impact on the rise of the free Aceh Movement with a militaristic form. During the administration of President Megawati, Aceh was even made an area of military operations. These political changes had a significant impact on the dynamics of the social life of the people of Aceh. Jakarta responded to Aceh by issuing Law No. 44/1999 on Aceh special status and its implementation of Islamic jurisprudence through the state approach.

Aceh in the aftermath of the reform underwent fundamental changes in terms of the position of Islam as the source of formal setting of the social order. The majority of Muslims in Aceh believed that the application of Islamic Sharia in Aceh in 2001 was a form of repayment of rights in Aceh that had been lost since the colonial era. Arskal Salim (2008, pp. 156-159) noted that the special status of Aceh and the implementation of the Islamic jurisprudence followed by the issuance of a number of Islamic Sharia regulation, have set the establishment of a new institution and social life. This can be seen in the issuance of *Perda* (Regional Regulation) No. 3/2000 concerning the establishment of a Consultative Assembly of Ulemas (MPU), and Law No. 10/2003 on Sharia Court, Law No. 9/2003 on the functional relationship between the MPU and the Legislative, Executive and other government agencies in Aceh. Regarding the arrangement of Islamic jurisprudence in the community, the Government of Aceh, among others, issued Law No. 11/2002 on the implementation of Islamic Sharia related to Islamic faith, worship and rituals; Law No. 12/2003 on prohibition of liquor; Law 13/2003 on prohibition of gambling; Law No. 14/2003 on prohibition of seclusion; as well as Law No. 7/2004 on arrangement of alms.

NON-MUSLIMS IN THE ISLAMIC SHARIA STAGE

The position of non-Muslims in the Islamic Shari'a regulations in Aceh can be traced from the Law No. 05/2000 on the implementation of Islamic Sharia law. The Law asserts that "other religions outside of Islam will continue to be recognized in this region, their religious teachings can be practiced by their

respective followers” (article 2 (2)). This paragraph normatively recognizes the existence of non-Muslims in Aceh. They are respected, protected and given the freedom to worship according to the teachings of their religion (Marzuki, 2010, pp. 164-165). Although the dictum is quite firm, non-Muslims have concerns about their position in the Islamic Sharia in Aceh discourse. These concerns are especially associated with equality and justice as citizens who embraced a non-mainstream religion.

These concerns are well-grounded considering some of the Laws in Aceh deal directly with the limitations of their religious rights. At least this can be seen in Law No 11/2006 on the governance of Aceh. It is mentioned that the construction of a place of worship in Aceh requires the permission of the Provincial Aceh Government and the city/regency government (article 127 (4)). This provision is an attempt by the Acehnese government to assert its authority over the permit application process. It was anticipated that a Law on places of worship would provide more details at the later stage (article 127 (5)). The first step towards this occurred in July 2007, when the Governor of Aceh passed Regulation 25/2007 on Places of Worship. This required applicants for a place of worship to obtain the signatures of at least 150 members and the approval of at least 120 local residents (article 3 (2)) (See. Crouch, 2010, pp. 410).

The Aceh Government policies to restrict houses of worship has quite an impact on the dynamics of non-Muslim religious life. This rule makes it difficult for them to build houses of worship and their population has increased both because marriage and birth. Sometimes, their place of worship was raided because it was considered to have no license. For example, in Peunayong Banda in mid 2012, the Indonesia Bethel Church (GBI) which was thought to have no permit was attacked by vigilantes. A similar case also happened to GBI community in Langsa. Tetsan, caretaker of the GBI Langsa told researchers that what the residents accused as a real Church was actually not one, but it was a place where they do worship as they do not have a church of their own. The GBI does not intend to build a Church in Langsa, but only need a place where the GBI congregation can perform worship.

Table 1: Number of Places of Worship and Congregants In Aceh

	Place of Worship	Number	Congregants
1.	Mosque (Muslims)	3.991	4.413.244
2.	<i>Meunasah</i> (Muslims)	7.816	
3.	Church (Protestants dan Catholics)	154	53.624

4.	Vihara (Buddhists)	14	7.062
5.	Temple (Confucians)	2	318

Source: BPS province of Aceh, year 2010

Another issue facing Aceh Christians is associated with Law No. 11/2002 which regulates the code of dress for Muslim women in public places such as schools, government institutions, private or the like. Non-Muslim women are expected to (sometimes) or required to adjust to the dress code. Clothing has lately become one of the significant issues in the format of the Muslim-Christian relations in Aceh. News coverage of the mass media about requirement from officers of the *Wilayatul Hisbah* to non-Muslim women to wear a hijab became headlines in the print or electronic mass media (Jakarta Globe March 2013). Non-Muslim women in Langsa, for example, due to fear of raids would wear a hijab or specified dress. Their confession as a non-Muslim may not necessarily be trusted by the Sharia police when they are raided in the middle of the road due to not wearing a *hijab*. This has resulted in about 50 out of 108 family members affiliated with the HKBP Church in Langsa wear *hijab* or at least sometimes wear a *hijab* on certain occasions. In addition, out of 21 Christian female teachers, as many as 16 of them wear headscarves at the school where they work (Ansor, 2013).

Feelings of being discriminated because of Islamic jurisprudence are also expressed by the students in public schools. In Aceh Singkil, Norim Brutu, a school teacher complained about the absence of teachers who teach the subject of Christianity. Further, Norim Brutu said that all non-Muslim students got 6 as their passing grade, whereas if they study the subjects of their own religion, it is very likely they will get better grades in the report book (Interview with Norim Brutu, 2013).

Discrimination in public places was also experienced by Yuli, a teacher at a vocational school in Aceh Tamiang. Yuli often feels the suspicion of some fellow Muslim teachers regarding her teaching strategies that she applies at the school. The English subject that she is teaching is suspected to lessen the students' faith due to the fact that she is a Christian (interview with Yuli, 2013). In Langsa, Mayesty, a university student felt that certain lecturers in her campus often discredit her religion when giving a lecture (interview with Mayesti, 2013). Grace, a student told me that she always thought of finishing school as soon as possible and go to College outside of Aceh in order to be freed from situations that place them as second-class citizens just because of her being Christian (interview with Grace, 2013).

Other issues that form the relation between Muslims and Christians are

related to Christianization and apostatization. The development of Christian populations during the last 14 years for example is believed to be not only due to birth but also because of a religious movement. The issue arose when in 2011 Vice Governor Muhammad Nazar in a lecture on religion said that about 20,000 residents of Aceh have become non-Muslims (www.inilah.com, 2011). Nazar's statement represents a long discourse that develops in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami event; apostatization has always been an issue of discussion in public spaces.

The figures mentioned by Nazar were unfounded due to the increase of the Christian population in Aceh, the BPS data in 2010 does not show that number. In 1994, the *Balitang* of Ministry of Religious Affairs stated that the non-Muslim population in Aceh was 51,586 (Mubarok, 1994, p. 99), while the 2010 population Census showed that the Christian population was 53,624 (BPS Aceh, 2010), in which there was an increase during 14 years of 2,038 people. This growth seems to me as still relatively normal if not sluggish. However, regardless of the accuracy of the data, the issue of religious conversion in Aceh has become a crucial conversation that forms tension in the relations between Muslims and Christians in contemporary Aceh.

TENSIONS BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN ACEH SINGKIL

Aceh Singkil lies at the southwestern tip of Aceh and is bordered by North Sumatra. It is a newly created district of the South Aceh district in 1999, and since 2006 Aceh Singkil district has become *Subulussalam* City. The ethnic groups inhabiting Aceh Singkil are quite diverse, among others, ethnic Aceh, Singkil, Batak, Minangkabau, Nias, and some other minor ethnic groups such as Javanese, Bugis, Arabs, and Keling (www.acehsingkilkab.go.id). This ethnic diversity is correlated with the diversity of the religious background of its people.

Aceh Singkil District is, as the second after Southeast Aceh, is as a region with the largest Christian population in Aceh. According to the BPS Aceh 2010, of 53,624 Christians living in Aceh, Southeast Aceh has the largest (33,483), followed by the district of Aceh Singkil (11,461), Banda Aceh (2,002) and Subulussalam (1,496). In addition, the Christian population in other districts/cities is a few dozen to hundreds in each district. The percentage of Christian population in Aceh Singkil district is 10 percent of the total residents of Singkil, which amounted to 107,781 people (BPS Singkil, 2012). Astia Gajah, a caretaker of the GKPPD (Christian Church) at Kuta Kerangan estimated that the population of Christians in Aceh Singkil is much larger than the official

figures from BPS, i.e. 15,000 (Interview with Astia Gajah, 2013).

Its geographical location bordering North Sumatra makes social life, especially regarding Muslims and Christian relations, in Aceh Singkil quite dynamic. Tension and harmony have been part of the dynamics of religious life of the communities in the area. The tensions between Muslims and Christian at least can be traced since the case of burning six churches in 1979. It lasted until the early 1980s. The conflict reemerged in 2001 when a number of church burnings took place again five years later (2006). It culminated in 2012 when at least 20 Churches were sealed and a church in Bener Sub-district was attempted to be burnt.

Church-burning incident in 1979, according to Astia Gajah—caretaker of Kuta Karangan Church, began with the loss of timber that would be used to build a Catholic Church in Mandumpang. The timber was brought from Siatas floated down the river. However, when passing through the village of Bulu Duri, a Muslim majority village, the timber was gone. The loss of this timber was a hot topic among members of the community. The Christians suspected that the loss was due to the act of sabotage of the Muslims, because it disappeared when passing through the Muslim village. However, Muslims could not accept the allegations due to lack of evidence (Interview with Astia Gajah, 2013).

At that time this area was still part of the area of South Aceh District. In local government offices the story about the loss of the timber that would be used to build a church in Mandumpang was a hot topic of discussion. It should be noted that the employees of the government offices of the district come from many different religious groups. While the talk was in progress, there was a Christian person in the district blaming Muslims for the loss of the timber. Christians believed that since the village was an area of predominantly Muslims, it was impossible for Christians to get there to steal the timber. Muslims were offended by the remark. While returning home from work, this Christian man was intercepted on the road and beaten by vigilantes. He was beaten because Muslims thought he was trying to pit Christians against Muslims. The incident occurred in Lipat Kijang with Muslim majority population (interview with Astia Gajah, 2013).

The beating did not stop there. More incidents of the beating of Christians occurred. According to Astia Gajah, at that time there were Christians who were sought after by Muslims. “My name was one who was sought to be killed,” he said. The list of names of people sought after includes his name. He said, when a Muslim in Lipat Kajang who knew him read the list, the Muslim man said, “We will kill this guy? He is our children’s teacher. What kind of people are we? Go Home!”Astia Gajah was widely known in Lipat Kajang because he

was a teacher in the village. According to him, it is estimated there were 50 Christians listed in the search. This event resulted in the majority of Christians sought refuge and got out of Singkil. They fled to the Dairi, Sidikilang, Sibolga and other places in North Sumatra Province. The evacuation was necessary because at the same time a number of lists of names of Christians were circulating around the area. People who were sought after their families then took refuge (interview with Astia Gajah, 2013).

There was no retaliation from the Christians. However, the beating turned into a source of sentiment. A number of churches, both Catholic and Protestant were burnt. According to Astia, there were six churches burnt, four belonging to the Protestants and two belonging to the Catholics. The Protestant Churches burnt were in Siatas, Gunung Meriah, Sangga Beru, and Mandumpang (Interview, with Astia Gajah 2013). The Catholic Churches were those in Madumpang and Gunung Meriah. The church in Siatas was completely burnt down. It was no longer usable. Before burning the church, people first tore it down. Other churches were also in such condition. Since the materials were mostly of timber, the Church was easily set on fire (Interview with Norim Brutu, 2013).

The conflict was later successfully mediated by the Governments of Aceh and North Sumatra. Muslims and Christians lived side by side again for quite a long period of time. However, the conflict arose again in 2001. The period from 2001 to 2006 was a period of the rise of identity struggle in Aceh as Islamic territory. In this period, the Government began sending the *dais* (Islamic preachers) at the border areas and in villages. This time, the harmony between Christians and Muslims started to get into trouble again. The village preachers at the border areas began to play a role to include values that later became the seed of hatred towards people of other religions. Nevertheless, no conflict occurred during this period. The issue revolved around the instruction of village preachers to Muslims not to give the signatures required to build a Church.

My informant told me that he often heard the preachers at the border areas or the Mosque Imams saying that giving support to the construction of the church is sinful and contrary to Islam. Things like this then strengthened in the following years. An example of this was the attempt of burning the church in Sangga Beru and Gunung Meriah in 2006 that failed, as the information was quickly responded to. The second attempt occurred on February 19, 2007, or the day after the inauguration of the Regent of Singkil, Makmur Syahputra. Hartono Berutu, a teacher at Gunung Meriah suspected that the attempt to burn the Church was a message that the Regent appointed should not be too close to the Christians because in the election he got absolute support from

the Christian voters (interview with Hartono Berutu, 2013).

In 2007, the Government of Aceh issued Gubernatorial Regulation (*Pergub*) No. 25/2007 on the guidelines for the establishment of houses of worship. In this Regulation, the establishment of houses of worship must include signatures of 150 congregants' and 120 of the local community members. This rule differs from the PBM (joint ministerial regulation) of 2006 governing the number of signatures required i.e. 50 of the congregants and 60 of the local community. The church management at Siatas had to fix the file to get a permit for the renovation of the Church, because the files sent contained only 50 signatures of the local community members and 90 of the congregants. However, they felt that there was a change in the attitude among local Muslims who were no longer willing to give their signatures after hearing the advice of Mosque Imam and Border area *Dai* who came to preach in their village.

The year 2012 was a stressful year for Christians and Muslims. This year was marked by the establishment of Islamic organizations such as FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) and FUI (Forum of Muslims). These organizations even started to enter into the policy makers and peripheries of society. This could be noticed when the local Government formed a team to monitor and evaluate churches. This team aims to monitor the development and renovation of each church. The team then showed the data of the increase in the number of churches without a permit and the renovation of several churches, also without a permit. This resulted in Islamic organizations taking peaceful action in Aceh Singkil District. The village preachers called on Muslims to join the demonstration. Peace action was gaining widespread support from the church monitoring and evaluation team. On May 1st and 3rd the sealing of churches began to take place in Singkil. They sealed 16 churches deemed to have permit problems.

In fact, on May 2nd, three Village Chiefs in which there were five churches in their villages sealed and nine churchmen met with the Local Government to express objections and asked for a dialog on the matter. The Local Government opened the dialog, regardless of the aspirations of the three village chiefs to stop the act of sealing and permit the churches to perform their activities. On the 3rd of May, the sealing action continued by the monitoring team. The churches that were sealed included *GKPPD Siatas, GKPPD Kuta Tinggi, GKPPD Tuhtuhen, GKPPD Dangguren, GKPPD Biskang, GKPPD Siompin, GKPPD Mandumpang, GMII Siompin, GMII Mandumpang, RK Mandumpang, RK Napa Galuh, RK Lae Mbalno, Rumah Ibadah Aliran Kepercayaan Pambi Mandumpang, JKI Kuta Karang, JKI Lae Mbalno, dan HKI Suka Makmur* (Letter No 115/PP/V/2012). The sealing action still continued into the

following days, making a total of houses of worship sealed off as many as 21.

The case of sealing churches in Singkil shows that local governments became the dominant actor. The FPI then acting on behalf of the FUI (Forum of Muslims) held a peaceful action on April 30, 2012 in order to enforce its demand to the Government to quickly regulate churches. The Government who already had a monitoring and evaluation team immediately responded by sealing churches in many locations. The team successfully sealed 16 churches on May 1 and 3, 2012. The police and the Ulema Consultative Assembly (MPU) also became the party that approved the action, or at least allowed it to occur. The Local Government, the MPU, and the police did not attempt to facilitate a dialog with the Church or Christians (Baqir, 2013, pp. 41-42).

Other crucial actors include the *dais* at the border areas and the village preachers. Although not directly involved in the action, their role was considerable in sowing views that resulted in the emergence of the distance in the relation between Muslims and Christians. This role appears in the message to Muslims not to give permission if asked to approve church construction. Other role was to encourage Muslims to participate in demonstrations against the houses of worship (church). The role of these actors could be noticed because before they were stationed at their respective posts, relations between Muslims and Christians was harmonious (Baqir, 2013, pp. 42).

MEDIATION AND RELIGIOUS ELITE HARMONY PLEDGE

Mediation is an important position in the process of resolving conflicts between believers in Aceh Singkil District. With regard to conflicts of 1979, on July 11, the two sides signed a joint statement which consisted of the following agreement: (1) Muslims and Christians in the area of Simpang Kanan shall guarantee public order, security and stability of the region and the realization of harmony of religion; (2) requesting the Government that the perpetrators of the disturbances of order and security from both the Muslim and Christian sides to be dealt with according to law; (3) construction/repairing of churches and other related matters shall not be carried out before a permit from the Government of South Aceh District is obtained—this is in accordance with the Joint Decision of the Minister of Religious Affairs and Minister of Home Affairs No. 1/1969; (4) violations of the points mentioned above shall be dealt with according to applicable law; (5) no visits from pastors or priests or clerics from the outside who give lecture/training/sacraments to people in the Simpang Kanan sub-district unless with a permit from the local government (Document of Joint Statement, 1979).

To strengthen the Joint Statement, on 13 October 1989, the Local Government facilitated the two sides to sign the Pledge of Harmony in an effort to build understanding and to resolve conflict between each other. Each side wrote down their pledge. The Christians had 11 points of pledge and Muslims wrote down 8. The pledge in principle contains five major points that include rules on religious proselytization, foreign aid, houses of worship (construction and renovation), keeping order by not triggering conflict and incitement, and eliminating things that could cause religious sentiment. In the pledge, Muslims help regulate mass action of Muslims so that similar incidents do not reoccur (Pledge of Harmony, 2013). Norim Brutu, one of the Curial teachers in Siatas said:

“The agreement stated that Christians shall not build worship houses, bring evangelists from outside, and the only Christian house of worship allowed is the Church of Kuta Kerangan at Simpang Kanan Sub-district. And as the tolerance of Muslims, the Christians are given four *undung-undung* (a kind of small mosque). The *undung-undung* were for a few places only, i.e. Gunung Meriah (GKPPD Gunung Meriah, Gunung Meriah Sub-district), di Kerras (GKPPD Kerras, Suro Sub-district), in Sosor (GKPPD Sosor), and in Biskang (GKPPD Biskang) (Interview with Norim Brutu, 2013).”

This Agreement lasted long enough. A prominent conflict between Muslims and Christians had not emerged until 2001. In 2001, the GKPPD Church Kuta Karangan conducted some renovations. Astia Gajah said that the increase of the number of congregants required the GKPPD Church Kuta Karangan to be renovated. They had communicated orally with Regent Makmur Syahputra to ask for permission of the renovation. But this renovation was considered to have violated the agreement in a joint statement and Harmony Pledge in 1979. The *Muspida* and Islamic figures had a meeting without involving the Christians. They had objected to the renovation. The Christian figures were disappointed because they were not involved in the meeting, particularly when the issue was about the Church. The results of that meeting were then communicated to the Christian people in the form a decision. Tensions then reappeared. Norim Brutu said that Christians signed the 2001 deal under pressure. One informant said, “We feared for our lives, so we signed the agreement.”

The discussion above shows that the role of key actors in the construction of houses of worship in Aceh Singkil District is very important. They always respond to the tension with dialog. The meetings between the parties are always aimed to obtain the best solution for each party. The Government

facilitates meetings between representatives of Muslims and Christians to look for solutions and agreements. They turn the agreement into the form of a statement, pledge, and written deal. This kind of agreement can effectively quell the potential of violence (Baqir, 2013, pp. 42).

Openness of dialog is an interesting phenomenon in the settlement of Muslim-Christian tension in Singkil. When referring to the Church-burning cases which occurred in 1979, the dialog was done to quell the violence. After the situation was conducive that same year, Muslims and Christians facilitated by the Local Government made a Pledge of Harmony in an effort to build mutual understanding and not to incite conflict. A joint statement and Pledge of Harmony was a form of mediation which, in the long run, can reduce religious conflicts in Aceh Singkil District. Since 1979 until 2001 there had not been a single case of church burning. New tensions arose in 2001, when the Christians intended to renovate the Church GKPPD Kuta Karang. Muslims argued that the renovation had violated the agreement in a joint statement and Pledge of Harmony in 1979 (the Baqir, 2013, pp. 48-49.).

To anticipate the impact of tensions, again a meeting was held to make arrangements between Muslims and Christians which was better known as the Mutual Agreement on October 11, 2001). This agreement contained five points that strengthened an agreement made in 1979. Similarly, when there was violence in 2012, the Muslims and the Christians returned to dialog to resolve the problems. Something that ought to be appreciated is that the Christians preferred to have dialog, meet with the Governor and send an objection letter to the Government, rather than other possible steps that would add to the tension. In addition to the concern, Baqir referred to the church conflicts in Singkil as providing a message about the importance and significance of mediation and dialog in resolving the problem (Baqir, 2013, p. 49).

‘WE ARE FROM THE SAME ANCESTORS’

Although the Muslim-Christian relations in Singkil have often been tinged with conflict and tension, locals never fell for it. In contrast, the relations between Christians and Muslims in religious life in the countryside are harmonious and peaceful. In this section I will present ethnographic notes concerning the life of everyday life in three villages namely Kuta Karang, Pandan Sari and Siatas. Kuta Karang has almost one hundred percent Christian population while its neighbor, Pandan Sari, the entire population is Muslim. These two villages were previous one village but later was separated due to the creation of a new district. As for the Muslim majority village, Siatas, Christian population reaches one-third of the total. While Kuta Karang where the GKPPD

Church is located, is the only church that the Local Government recognizes in Singkil. As for the village of Siatas, GKPPD church Siatas grabbed the most spotlight due to the resistance of the citizens during church sealing activities conducted by the monitoring and evaluation team of Singkil in 2012.

Although the majority of the inhabitants of the village of Kuta Karang is Muslim, in the everyday life of the cooperation between the two communities runs harmoniously. This is visible from the social interaction between the two communities in various dimensions of life, such as *gotong-royong*, transaction services, celebration of marriage, and so forth. When I came to the home of Astia Gajah, one of the Curial teachers in Kuta Karang, he is working on building a home. He said that the home was prepared for his children. All four people working on his home, the builders, were all Muslim, and came from the neighboring village, Pandan Sari. According to Astia, the village, formerly Pandan Sari and Kuta Karang were the same village.

Cooperation between Muslims and Christians in Singkil is also visible from the process of the church construction. Norim Brutu recounted that the builders who are currently working to build and renovate the GKPPD Church come from the village of Muslim majority, Siatas. In this construction process, cooperation-between Muslims and Christians in the Singkil is not hampered by the different religious restrictions. Search for builders or architects, according to Norim Brutu, focuses the persons who can work professionally in accordance with the requirements of the job, not based on religious background. Similar things also happen when people share a mutual-home development to help other villagers. It is the custom of the villagers in Siatas, Pertabas, Pandan Sari, and Kuta Karang or other places in Singkil in which the people share work to help residents build their homes. Mutual cooperation in building homes is done jointly involving Muslim communities, without being restricted by religion.

Wedding is one of the social processes that allows the encounter of people from different backgrounds. During a wedding reception, the community members in the villages invite each other although they have different religion. Each group always respects the values and social codes that apply in each religion. When the wedding reception is held by a Christian family, the host specifically provides food in boxes ordered from a Muslim restaurant. This is to respect the Muslims who have particular obstacles when eating food cooked by the Christian family. Astia Gajah said:

“We invite each other and come to each other’s wedding party. If there are Muslim guests, we prepare catering, special box provided with rice

inside for them. It has generally been accepted. If someone has Muslim relative, they will take food from the caterer. The food is also prepared for Muslim neighbors. In this village, it is no longer the issue. This is our neighboring village, Pandan Sari. All are Muslims. We can work together. I'm building a new home and all the workers are Muslims. There is no problem for us. I never look for Christian men only when searching for workers. Our mutual goal is also the same, it makes no difference. Here, the issue of religion is no problem for us in our daily socialization" (interviewed with Rahma, 2013).

Food so far is in fact a form of Muslim-Christian relation format in Aceh Singkil District. Similarly elsewhere, *halal* foods for Muslims have different definitions and values according to Christians. Some Muslims think that they may not eat food cooked by Christians. Adlin, an administrator of the FKUB Singkil and ex-member of Singkil DPRK (District House of Representatives), said that he is always careful in choosing foods provided by Christians. But he also never rejected certain types of foods that are served by Christians. Adlin further said that during his working visit to a church at Kuta Karang, he was served with durian and mineral water. For Adlin, eating durian or drinking mineral water provided by Christian is not prohibited, since the food is wrapped. Similarly, the attitude of the Church which provided mineral drink and durian, not tea or coffee which is very common among the people of Singkil to serve guests, was also done based on consideration of the difference in understanding of each group in defining halal food.

I am going to write down my experience while doing interviews at the home of Astia Gajah. I came to his house at 10 am and finished the discussion at 1:30. We had discussion in a gazebo in his yard. During the discussion Astia did not serve drinks. In fact this is the second time I interviewed him and during this time, I had mineral drink. When lunch time came, Astia was careful enough to offer me lunch at his home before I went on a trip to meet the other informants. In order not to break the ice, I said to Astia that I am used to the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, including food. I said, in Islam there are people who are selective in matter of food served by non-Muslims, but I am not like them. Upon hearing my answer, Astia invited me to get into the house, and his family then prepared lunch.

Astia told me about his brother who was unwilling to eat food or drink that he had prepared because he has converted to Islam. However, according to him, many Muslims who came to his house would welcome the food that was served by his family. Anita, a resident in the village of Siatas admitted that she took it easy when it comes to the difference of food and beverages

between Muslims and Christians. She admitted it is *haram* for example to eat pork for Muslims. However, she believed when he drops by to a neighboring house belonging to Christians, surely they will not serve food that is *haram* to Muslims.

Both communities understand the limits that they learn from their respective faith, and seek to actualize those limits in social interaction in society despite different religions. Rahma, for example ask me if Muslims are allowed to enter the church when invited to attend a wedding of a relative or neighbor who is Christian. She said she always attended the ceremony, since attending an invitation is required in Islam. Rahma heard an Imam at the Mosque say that it is forbidden for Muslims to enter a church. She asked what if the bride is her sister whose religion is different from hers. Christians hold weddings in the church. Rahma continued, she went into church not convert to another religion, but merely to honor her sister's wedding. She further said that the community members here attended wedding ceremonies in the church even though they are Muslims. However, people became confused when the Mosque Imam banned them from entering the church.

The above case shows the complexity of Muslim-Christian relations at the grassroots level. Basically they have no barriers to interacting even though they embrace different religions. Therefore, the villagers that I interviewed said that they were concerned over the disaster that befell their relatives and neighbors especially when their churches were sealed. They could not believe that people from outside came to their village to seal the church. Rahma said, when the church in Siatas was being sealed, she could not witness the incident, because she just could not see her relatives to lose their right to worship. In our discussion, Rahma said:

“Problems like this are in fact should be communicated to the Muslims. If you go to see the non-Muslims, they will not say what I said because they are afraid of telling the truth. If you get there later, write and convey to the Government there, please let them build the church and give them freedom of religion, because it doesn't bother us, the Muslims. We want to live in harmony and side by side. What we say is what they really want to say. This is their goal. We are brothers and sisters, though different religions, our ancestors were the same. Maybe they did not dare to tell the truth like this, so we are here to help them to say what they want to say. Spread the words that the community and village figures in Siatas want their aspirations fulfilled. Please allow the Christians to build the church. Our message is to convey to the Central Government, not only to the District or the Provincial.”

The narrative of the communities in the villages regarding Muslim-Christian relations in Aceh Singkil District is often contrary to the construction of the elites. Meanwhile, the elite community members of Aceh Singkil try to draw a line of demarcation that separates collective identity between the Muslims and the Christians, as well as separating them in the space of social interaction; on the contrary, the communities in rural areas show the opposite attitude. Instead of questioning their religious differences, Muslims and Christians in these areas are more concerned with how their fellow citizens can interact harmoniously in everyday life. Rahma was quoted as saying, "As we did not want to be banned to worship in the mosque, we also should not ban them from worshipping in the church".

CONCLUSION

The above discussion reveals that discrimination, tension and harmony often tinge social relations between Muslims and Christians in Aceh Singkil District. Discrimination against non-Muslims, among others, triggered by the efforts of the elite of society and Local Governments in Aceh who are doing whatever they can to make Islam the only collective identity in the Terrace of Mecca. Non-Muslims, especially Christians, are placed as citizens who have limited access in showing their collective identity in public spaces. However, on the other hand the fact that the Aceh communities in Singkil have various background cannot be challenged. Because of this, social relations between religions and collective identity formation of the Christian and Muslim communities are complex and dynamic.

Muslim-Christian relations format in the debate over the Islamic jurisprudence in Aceh Singkil displayed by the elite of society especially Muslims in Aceh Singkil District, in some respects, the everyday dynamics, are in contrast with the reality in the community. While the elites are trying to draw a separating line, the communities have done their best to live in harmony. While the elites are concerned with restrictions against Christians, the community members are giving their support. The awareness that they are from the same ethnic group encourages more attitude of humanism than a narrow religious ideology. The result is shown in the above studies; This research shows that the Muslim-Christian relation is a dramaturgical process whose appearance in the front stage different from that outside the stage.

The roots of Muslim-Christian relation tension are low understanding of religious tolerance. Therefore, to end this article, I recommend the importance of rethinking the concept of Islamic jurisprudence in Aceh, at least regarding the relations with non-Muslims. Discrimination experienced by non-Muslims

in Aceh Singkil and Aceh, among others, is triggered by low awareness, especially religious tolerance of the majority against the minority group. Therefore, we need to gain insight into tolerance and awareness of diversity among Muslim communities in Aceh, be it through education in colleges, schools, Islamic boarding schools, Qur'anic studies and the community in general.

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