

ISLAMIC ACEHNESE IDENTITY, SHARIA, AND CHRISTIANIZATION RUMOR A Study of the Narratives of the Attack on the Bethel Church in Penauyong Banda Aceh

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Abstract: This paper explores the narratives of the attack on the Bethel church (GBI/Gereja Bethel Indonesia) in Penauyong Aceh on June 17, 2012, provided for by the victims. Among these are those who hold fear of Christian missionaries, including one of the likely perpetrators, and those who dismissed these as mere rumors. After relating the incident to other violence across the nation during the reform period and to the local Aceh context, the paper delved into the interviews undertaken on July 2013, from which the sources of narratives were taken, explaining motivations behind the mob, trauma resulting from it, and other factors contributing to the incident. Through this article I argue that the sharia implementation raise the new identity formulation of Islamic Acehnese, through which the dividing line between ‘Muslims’ and others ‘non-Muslims’ is further stressed. This in turn nurtures, among other things, the sentiments among the Acehnese against the non-Muslims.

Keywords: Islamic Acehnese identity, Bethel Church, violence, sharia implementation, Christianization

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Introduction: Violence at the National Level

In the aftermath of Suharto's fall, the crisis during the reformation era, marked with the euphoria of freedom of expression in the new wave of democratization, witnessed various forms of violence in the name of religion, one of which was attacks on minorities.² Ahmadiyah, Shi'ite, Sufi, Christian churches, and other new religious groups branded deviant by the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) were vulnerable to intimidations and attacks by radical groups or mobs³. On the other hand, through mass rallies on the streets, groups, such as the FPI (Defenders front of Islam), HTI (Indonesian Party of Liberation), MMI (Jihadi Council of Indonesia), FUI (Islamic Forum Community), FAPB (Front for Anti-apostasy in Bekasi), put pressure on the government and society to implement policies in line with their radical ideologies, such as religious intolerance.⁴ In short, the free atmosphere in the more democratic country gave the radicals an opportunity to propagate their ideology.

Along with the bolder move of radicals and conservatives in the public domain⁵ (Hefner 2008), the more muscular Islamic orthodoxy under the guardianship of the MUI has somehow contributed to the government's indifferent attitude, especially under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration, towards discriminations against minorities. As a result, leaders of many minority groups, such as Lia

² Julia Day Howell, "Pluralist Currents and Counter-Currents in the Indonesian Mass Media," in *Religious Pluralism, State and Society in Asia*, ed. Chiara Formici (London: Routledge, 2014), 216–35; Mark Woodward, *Java, Indonesia and Islam* (Dordrecht, Holland; Cinnaminson [N.J.], U.S.A.: Springer, 2011), 225; Myengkyo Seo, *State Management of Religion in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1–2; Robert W. Hefner, "A Conservative Turn in Indonesian Islam? Genesis and Future.," in *Muslim Politics and Democratization in Indonesia*, Annual Indonesia Lecture Series 28 (Clayton, Vic.; Melbourne, Vic.: Monash Asia Institute, 2008), 33–50.

³ Ahmad Suaedy et al., *Islam, the Constitution and Human Rights, the Problematics of Religious Freedom in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Wahid Institute, 2010), 131–208; Ahmad Suaedy, "Religious Freedom and Violence in Indonesia," in *Islam in Contention: Rethinking Islam and State in Indonesia*, ed. Ota Atsushi and Okamoto Masaaki (Jakarta: Wahid Institute, 2010), 139–69; Al Makin, "Persecuting, Prosecuting Minorities," *The Jakarta Post*, September 3, 2012.

⁴ Ismail Hasani and Bonar Tigor Naipospos, *Dari Radikalisme Menuju Terorisme, Studi Relasi Dan Transformasi Organisasi Islam Radical Di Jawa Tengah Dan D.I. Yogyakarta* (Jakarta: Pustaka Media, 2012).

⁵ Hefner, "A Conservative Turn in Indonesian Islam? Genesis and Future."

Eden of the Eden group based in Jakarta and Yusman Roy of the Itikaf Lelaku based in Malang, whom the radicals attacked, were trialed in the courts and jailed⁶ (Makin, 2011; Makin, forthcoming). They were accused of committing blasphemy law 1965, over which some moderate and liberal Muslim intellectuals failed to propose a judicial review to the Constitutional Court (MK) in 2010.⁷ Minorities—including Islamic minority groups (such as the Shi'ite, Ahmadiyah) and non-Islamic groups (such as Christian churches or apostates from Islam)—have no legal protection before the law and were easily persecuted and prosecuted.

On the other hand, since the New Order period, the relationship between Muslims and Christians can be described as suspicious towards each other, due to the 'politicization' of religion during Soeharto's regime.⁸ In fact, the Christians as minority feared 'Islamization' and any efforts of the majority Muslims to pursue the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia. On the other hand, Muslims also often suspected that the Christians still perform missionary activities, such as in evangelization efforts to convert Muslims into Christians.⁹ With this, Muslims often protested the building of many new churches in the places in which only a few Christians resided. Worse still, the reform period also witnessed the fierce bloody conflict between the believers of the two Abrahamic

⁶ Al Makin, "Pluralism versus Islamic Orthodoxy, the Indonesian Public Debate over the Case of Lia Aminuddin, the Founder of Salamullah Religious Cult," *Journal of the International Yale Indonesia Forum*, 2011; Al Makin, *Challenging Islamic Orthodoxy, the Accounts of Lia Eden and Other Prophets in Indonesia* (Dordrecht, Holland; Cinnaminson [N.J.], U.S.A.: Springer, forthcoming).

⁷ Margiyono et al., "*Bukan Jalan Tengah*" *Eksaminasi Publik Putusan Mahkamah Konstitusi Perhal Pengujian Undang-Undang Nomor 1 PNPS Tahun 1965 Tentang Penyalahgunaan Dan/atau Penodaan Agama* (Jakarta: ILRC, 2010), 25–43.

⁸ Michel Picard, "Introduction, Agama, Adat, and Pancasila," in *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia, Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali*, ed. Michel Picard and Madinier (London: Routledge, 2011), 1–20; Rahmat Subagya, *Kepercayaan, Kebatinan Kerohanian Kejivaaan Dan Agama* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Yayasan Kanisius, 1980); Djoko Dwiyanto, *Penghayat Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*. (Yogyakarta: Pararaton, 2010); Seo, *State Management of Religion in Indonesia*.

⁹ Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Chang-Yau Hoon, "Between Evangelism and Multiculturalism: The Dynamics of Protestant Christianity in Indonesia," *Social Compass* 60, no. 4 (2013): 457–70.

religions in Ambon. Although the reconciliation between the two warring factions can be described as successful,¹⁰ the trauma resulted from the conflict does not fade away easily. In this vein, many radical groups often recalled the conflict as a justification of their intolerant actions.

It is also noteworthy that during the New Order era, there was a gap between intellectual endeavors made by some elite Muslim and Christian intellectuals, and NGO activists, to hold religious dialogues between different faiths and the government's policy which does not support religious freedom and equity. On the one hand, Muslim and Christian intellectuals in Yogyakarta, Jakarta, and Salatiga promoted the values of pluralism and inter-religious dialogues through seminar forums, books, and NGO's activities.¹¹ On the other hand, the government issued policy which still displayed intolerance and inequality in a society of religious plurality.

An illustration of the government's policy which still hampers the freedom of faith is the difficulty of the procedure required to build a house of worship. According to the Joint Regulation no. 8 and 9 of 2006, any religious community who want to establish a house of worship must collect at least 90 signatures of the congregation's members and those of 60 residents embracing another religion. Furthermore, the community must obtain a recommendation from the local office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and of the local government. Based on the regulation, it is hard for a small community lacking the numbers to fulfill the conditions necessary to have a place of worship. Due to this, many Christian communities in Yogyakarta,

¹⁰ Sumanto Al Qurtuby, "Peace-Building in Indonesia: Christian–Muslim Alliances in Ambon Island," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 24, no. 3 (2014): 349–67.

¹¹ Greg Barton, "Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as Intellectual Ulama: The Meeting of Islamic Traditionalism and Modernism in Neomodernist Thought," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 8, no. 3 (1997): 323–50; Mujiburrahman, "The Diaspora Church in Indonesia: Mangunwijaya on Nationalism, Humanism, and Catholic Praxis," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38, no. 4 (2001): 444–57; Ann. Kull, *Piety and Politics: Nurcholish Madjid and His Interpretation of Islam in Modern Indonesia* (Lund: Department of History and Anthropology of Religions Lund University, 2005); Makin, "Pluralism versus Islamic Orthodoxy, the Indonesian Public Debate over the Case of Lia Aminuddin, the Founder of Salamullah Religious Cult"; Al Makin, "Pluralism in Education, a Study of Mukti Ali's Thought," *Journal of the International Yale Indonesia Forum*, 2012; Hoon, "Between Evangelism and Multiculturalism: The Dynamics of Protestant Christianity in Indonesia"; Seo, *State Management of Religion in Indonesia*.

Jakarta, and West Java, used hotels, houses, and other places for their religious sermons. On the other hand, the number of mosques has recently increased significantly throughout islands in the country. In fact, Muslims do not need any permission from any authority to build mosques in many cities with Muslim majority populations. Ironically, radical groups often spread rumors among neighborhoods pointing to many places of worship without legal status or the government's permission, which they can ambush anytime (will also be shown by the Acehese informants below). This also spread additional fears among minorities.¹² Ichwan describes this situation as perpetuating the old 'majority Muslims' fear' to the minority Christians.

During the reform era, news about radicals mobs, attacking, destroying, or intimidating some churches belonging to minority Christians often appeared in the headlines of the media. Crouch¹³ remarks on the destruction of churches during the reform period as follows: Habibie's government (1998–99) witnessed 156 churches destroyed; Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001) 232 churches; under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–09) more than 100 churches were attacked or closed down by force of either mob or local governments. This can be seen as a national scenario, according to which much local violence shared similar stories and patterns¹⁴: radicals ambushed minorities without government's intervention to protect the victims, who were then often criminalized in the court trials. The attack on the Bethel church¹⁵ in Aceh, on which this paper is focused on, seems to

¹² Moch. Nur Ichwan, "Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization: The Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, Shariatization and Contested Authority in Post-New Order Aceh," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22, no. 2 (2011): 206; Melissa Crouch, "Implementing the Regulation on Places of Worship in Indonesia: New Problems, Local Politics and Court Action," *Asian Studies Review* 34, no. 4 (2010): 409; Hoon, "Between Evangelism and Multiculturalism: The Dynamics of Protestant Christianity in Indonesia," 462; Seo, *State Management of Religion in Indonesia*, 71–72.

¹³ Crouch, "Implementing the Regulation on Places of Worship in Indonesia: New Problems, Local Politics and Court Action," 406; Seo, *State Management of Religion in Indonesia*, 36.

¹⁴ Jemma Purdey, "Describing Kekerasan: Some Observations on Writing about Violence in Indonesia after the NewOrder," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 160, no. 2/3 (2004): 210.

¹⁴ Greg Barton, "Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as Intellectual Ulama: The Meeting of Islamic Traditionalism and Modernism in Neomodernist Thought," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8, no. 3 (1997): 323–50; Mujiburrahman, "The Diaspora Church in Indonesia: Mangunwijaya on Nationalism,

fall into this national scenario. However, this paper further pays attention to the ways in which local scenarios and narratives developed. Keep in mind that each attack of the places of worships has its own narrative, agency, supporters, and victims¹⁶ (Purdey 2004, p. 200). Thus local context, in which the attacks took place, should be further explained.

Local Aceh Context

From the colonial to reform era, for the Acehnese, Islam has always been part of their identity.¹⁷ In the eyes of most of Aceh Muslims, *adat* (custom) and sharia (Islamic law) have mingled, or become united—a belief justified by historical interpretation and

Humanism, and Catholic Praxis,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38, no. 4 (2001): 444–57; Ann. Kull, *Piety and Politics: Nurcholish Madjid and His Interpretation of Islam in Modern Indonesia* (Lund: Department of History and Anthropology of Religions Lund University, 2005); Makin, “Pluralism versus Islamic Orthodoxy, the Indonesian Public Debate over the Case of Lia Aminuddin, the Founder of Salamullah Religious Cult”; Al Makin, “Pluralism in Education, a Study of Mukti Ali’s Thought,” *Journal of the International Yale Indonesia Forum*, 2012; Fatimah Husein, *Muslim-Christian Relations in the New Order Indonesia: The Exclusivist and Inclusivist Muslims’ Perspectives*. (Bandung: Mizan, 2005); Hoon, “Between Evangelism and Multiculturalism: The Dynamics of Protestant Christianity in Indonesia”; Seo, *State Management of Religion in Indonesia*.

¹⁵ The Bethel church (GBI/*Gereja Bethel Indonesia*) is the largest Christian Pentecostal church in Indonesia and is under the PGI (*Persatuan Gereja Indonesia/Indonesian Communion Church*) administration. The Bethel church was founded in Tennessee, US in 1970. In Indonesia the GBI was initiated by priest Senduk and his friends from the Full Gospel Bethel Church (GBIS), a splinter of the GPdI (Pentecostal Church in Indonesia). In 2008 the GBI has about 2000 churches with 2.2 million believers. The church is officially acknowledged by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia with the letter no. 41 on December 9, 1972. Many mega Bethel churches have been built in big cities, such as Jakarta, Bandung, and Medan, which attract many middle class believers. See their websites: <http://www.gbi-bethel.org/> (accessed on September 5, 2014); <http://sinodegbi.net/> (accessed on September 5, 2014); <https://www.facebook.com/gerejabethelindonesia> (accessed on September 5, 2014); <http://www.gbitanjungduren.com/> (accessed on September 5, 2014) (See also Seo 2013, pp. 30, 37, 39, 41, 106-107; Hoon 2013).

¹⁶ Purdey, “Describing Kekerasan: Some Observations on Writing about Violence in Indonesia after the NewOrder,” 200.

¹⁷ Hasnil Basri Siregar, “Lessons Learned from the Implementation of Islamic Shari’ Ah Criminal Law in Aceh,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 24, no. 1 (2009 2008): 143; Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad, “The Application of Islamic Law in Indonesia: The Case Study of Aceh,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 1, no. 1 (2007): 135–80.

political ideology.¹⁸ Interestingly, the sharia is also a bargaining tool used by the central government to tame the rebellious movement for the Aceh's independence. To begin with, during the early period of Indonesian revolution, Daud Beureueh, a charismatic rebel leader against Jakarta, demanded from Sukarno the granting of a special status for the province Aceh with the implementation of Sharia on the region. However, both the first president and his successor Soeharto, upholding the secular ideology of the nation of Indonesia, failed to meet these demand. On the other hand, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), founded by Hasan Tiro in 1970s, was secular in nature. Salim, for instance, underscores that Tiro saw shari'a as an obstacle to achieve their goal of the Aceh's independence.¹⁹ However, in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster the promise of a rigorous implementation of sharia in the province was offered during the Helsinki peace negotiation in 2005, serving as an effective political strategy for the central government to end the war between the central government and the GAM.²⁰ Feener²¹, on the other hand, argues that the sharia is not only a top-down project deriving from the central government's political motivation and strategy but he also draws our attention to the fact that many local politicians also welcome the project. It appears that the picture of sharia's acceptance among the Acehese is more complex than either 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' project. The narratives in the following interviews will reveal the views of those who welcome, and those who are critical to, the implementation of sharia.

¹⁸ Arskal. Salim, "Shari'a from Below' in Aceh (1930s–1960s): Islamic Identity and the Right to Self-Determination with Comparative Reference to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32, no. 92 (2004): 83; Edward Aspinall, "The Construction of Grievance: Natural Resources and Identity in a Separatist Conflict," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 6 (2007): 958.

¹⁹ Salim, "Shari'a from Below' in Aceh (1930s–1960s): Islamic Identity and the Right to Self-Determination with Comparative Reference to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)," 92; Ichwan, "Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization: The Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, Shariatization and Contested Authority in Post-New Order Aceh," 204.

²⁰ Ichwan, "Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization: The Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, Shariatization and Contested Authority in Post-New Order Aceh," 198.

²¹ Michael Feener, *Sharia and Social Engineering, the Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19.

Moreover, I would like to argue that the status of special autonomy and the implementation of sharia in the post-Helsinki peace talks seem to further raise the Islamic identity in the Acehnese. The many testimonies highlighted below seem to confirm this. Apparently, the resurgence of a new identity articulation of being Acehnese and Muslim took in a rather novel way compared to the already existing root of Islamic identity justified by historical interpretation, stressing the belief that Aceh has been Islamized for a long time²². To begin with, it is important to note the difference between the identity expression of the Acehnese during the conflict and post-conflict. During the height of the conflict between the Indonesian government and the GAM, the dividing line between Acehnese and Indonesians, particularly the Javanese elites who, for the Acehnese, had drained the resources of the province without fair compensation for the local people, was highlighted.²³ However, in the new identity formulation concomitant with the sharia²⁴ implementation in the post-tsunami relief, the dividing line between we ‘Muslims’ and other ‘non-Muslims’ is stressed. It should also be borne in mind that after the tsunami disaster various non-Acehnese elements entered the territory from other provinces and abroad, for the purposes of relief programs, giving aids, and rebuilding the province after the devastation²⁵. This perhaps also further catapulted their identity as unique Islamic Acehnese, marking the difference between the locals and guests, the victims and helpers, the indigenous and foreigners.

²² Aspinall, “The Construction of Grievance: Natural Resources and Identity in a Separatist Conflict,” 959; Yusny Saby, “The Ulama in Aceh: A Brief Historical Survey,” *Studia Islamika*, 2001, 1–54.

²³ Aspinall, “The Construction of Grievance: Natural Resources and Identity in a Separatist Conflict,” 964.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Arskal. Salim, “Dynamic Legal Pluralism in Indonesia: Contested Legal Orders in Contemporary Aceh,” *Journal Of Legal Pluralism* 10, no. 61 (2010): 20; Marcus Mietzner, “Local Elections and Autonomy in Papua and Aceh: Mitigating or Fueling Secessionism?,” *Indonesia* 84, no. October (2007): 22; Philippe Le Billon and Arno Waizenegger, “Peace in the Wake of Disaster? Secessionist Conflicts and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32, no. 3 (2007): 402.

Along with the rise of Islamic orthodoxy at the national level of Indonesia during the reform era²⁶, Feener also highlights the increasing orthodoxy in Aceh especially after the implementation of sharia in the post tsunami disaster²⁷. Likewise, minority groups—Christian, sufi, or other groups branded deviant by the MPU—were vulnerable to mob attacks²⁸. Moreover, in the wake of the tsunami, some radical and conservative groups—such as Laskar Jihad, KAMMI (an Islamic student association affiliated to the Justice and Prosperity Party/PKS), FPI, MMI, Laskar Jihad, and HTI²⁹—also entered Aceh. On the other hand, the status of non-Muslims under the new implementation of sharia brings another dilemma, whether they, if committing sins or breaking Islamic law, can be punished under the sharia court³⁰.

Besides paying attention to the national level scenario mentioned above, we should also relate the attack on the Bethel church in Aceh to the issue of new identity formation of the Islamic Acehese, whose fear is renewed in facing the presence of minority Christian groups, seen as both non-Muslims and outsiders. It should also be kept in mind that most Christians in Aceh, particular in the Bethel church, come from Medan, Java, and Manado.

Whereas Crow³¹ calls our attention to the Acehese as a minority ethnic group put in the broader Indonesian archipelago and as victims of violence, military repression, and abuses, this paper pays particular attention to the Christians in the province as victims of violence within

²⁶ Clare Isobel Harvey, “Muslim Intellectualism in Indonesia: The Liberal Islam Network (JIL) Controversy,” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 43, no. 2 (2009): 13–52; Mun'im Sirry, “Fatwas and Their Controversy: The Case of the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2003): 100–117; Ichwan, “Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization: The Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, Shariatization and Contested Authority in Post-New Order Aceh.”

²⁷ Feener, *Sharia and Social Engineering, the Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh*, 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁹ Ichwan, “Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization: The Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, Shariatization and Contested Authority in Post-New Order Aceh,” 192–193.

³⁰ Salim, “Dynamic Legal Pluralism in Indonesia: Contested Legal Orders in Contemporary Aceh,” 25.

³¹ Karim Crow, “Aceh - The ‘Special Territory’ in North Sumatra: A Self-Fulfilling Promise?,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 20, no. 1 (2000): 91–104.

the majority Muslims. Interestingly, the issue of minority-majority, particularly Islam-Christian, relations in the country was addressed in the first debate of the Indonesian parliament in 1967 with the case of the Meulaboh incident, a town in the Aceh province. The story goes that local Muslims staged a serious protest against the building of a Methodist Church in the town, seen as unacceptable for the majority Muslims population. In the parliamentary debate, two Christian parties: Parkindo (Indonesian Protestant Party) and Partai Katolik addressed the issue and related it to vulnerable religious freedom in the country³². Moreover, during the post-conflict period, the Aceh local government issued the regulation no. 25, 2007 with a stricter rule to any community wanting to build a house of worship than the 2006 regulation states. According to this local regulation, the community has to collect 150 signatures of the members and those of 120 neighbors of a different faith³³. Interestingly, the Aceh ulama consider is the local regulations still too soft, leaving other faiths in fear of meeting what they feel is already a near-impossible condition³⁴.

Nevertheless, many scholars have speculated on the roots of violence and conflicts in Indonesia with different theories, such as competition for resources, grievance of injustice, the sudden loss of military intervention after the long repression, polarization of different religions and ethnicities, frustration during the crisis after Soeharto's fall, and prevalent conflicts during the historical junctures³⁵.

³² Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order*, 30–34; Crouch, "Implementing the Regulation on Places of Worship in Indonesia: New Problems, Local Politics and Court Action.," 405; Seo, *State Management of Religion in Indonesia*, 67.

³³ Ichwan, "Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization: The Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, Shariatization and Contested Authority in Post-New Order Aceh," 207.

³⁴ Crouch, "Implementing the Regulation on Places of Worship in Indonesia: New Problems, Local Politics and Court Action.," 410.

³⁵ Purdey, "Describing Kekerasan: Some Observations on Writing about Violence in Indonesia after the NewOrder"; Yuhki Tajima, "Explaining Ethnic Violence in Indonesia: Demilitarizing Domestic Security," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 8, no. 3 (n.d.): 451–72; Gerry Van Klinken, *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia: Small Town Wars.*, Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series No. 15 (London: Routledge, 2007); Jacques Bertrand, "Ethnic Conflicts in Indonesia: National Models, Critical Junctures, and the Timing of Violence," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 425–49.

Considering the above studies, the attack on the Bethel church in Penayoung is a social violence, or merely vigilantes whose scope was limited to local atrocities³⁶. On the other hand, I would like to argue that the sharia implementation further catapults the issue of Islamic identity among the Acehese, and the greater local autonomy in the era of decentralization of Indonesia further reinforces this Islamic identity resurgence.

The following discussion of the attack on the Bethel church in Penayoung is based on the victims' narratives and the Acehese Muslims' perception on Christianization. The below interviews are in line with the national-level narrative of Christianization and discrimination against minorities as explained above and the local narrative of the resurgence of Islamic identity formulation in the Acehese Muslims.

The Victims' Narratives

The following narratives were taken from the victims' perspective: a priest of the Bethel Church in Penayoung (Reverend Nico Tarigan) and four members of congregation (Mita, Mika, Ipon, and Sianturi) who were all attending the sermon during the attack on June 17, 2012.

Tarigan, the GBI (Bethel Church of Indonesia) priest who led the prayers during the attack, whom I interviewed on July 18 2013 after 9 PM in Madinah hotel of Banda Aceh, comes originally from Medan, where he finished his elementary and high school. He went to a university and studied Economics, which he, however, did not finish. As a priest, he believed that the Christian church should shoulder three duties: love and brotherhood (*koinoniyah/koinania*), taking care of the weaks (*diakoniyah/diakonia*), and bearing witness to faith (*marturiayah/martyria*) (see also Hoon 2013, p. 464), to which his life in Aceh has been devoted. In 2005, he moved to Aceh working under the YKPMNI (*Yayasan Kasih Peduli Masyarakat Indonesia*/The Institute of Love and Care for Indonesian Society) with the task of distributing aids to the Acehese victims of the tsunami. The aids mainly consisted of foods and medicine. He recalled that in 2005 the Yayasan brought 300 000 kgs rice, not to mention some medicine.

³⁶ Van Klinken, *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia: Small Town Wars*; Tajima, "Explaining Ethnic Violence in Indonesia: Demilitarizing Domestic Security," 452.

Soon, two Bethel churches were founded in Aceh with approximately 70 to 80 members in each church. However, upon the incident of the first attack in 2007 the church membership dwindled into 60 people. Now the church under the leadership of Tarigan has only 40 members, who mostly come from Medan, Manado and Java. Less than 10 members are Chinese from Aceh. There is no native Christian Achenese attending his congregation.

Tarigan Bethel's church was located in Jalan H. T. Daud Syah no. 47, Penauyong, Banda Aceh. As he did every day, on June 17, 2012, at about 10.15 in the morning, Tarigan went out from his store before leading prayers in his church. Note that both the store and church used the same building; while the store uses the first floor, the church operates on the second floor. However, in that morning he suspected that three groups of people were rushing to his building. Five people, two of whom were on motorcycles, stared at the second floor, where the church was located. As Tarigan was anxious, he then closed the iron folding gate immediately and climbed to the second floor to start the prayers.

When Tarigan delivered the second speech before his congregation, three members of the congregation abruptly shouted that a mob had arrived at the gate of the building. Suddenly, it was noisy, and the shattering of window glass was heard. Tarigan went down through the stairway to see what was happening. He saw Heru, a member of the congregation and of the Indonesian air force army arguing with one of the attackers, "who accused the church of having no government's license."

Part of the building wall was also broken. Seven people intruded into the church. The rest stayed outside shouting noisily. Some held beams and sticks. While Heru went out to meet them, Tarigan went to the second floor to protect the women and children. Those of the mob who entered the church destroyed some facilities and belongings: two computers, a sound system, an air conditioning, some light bulbs, guitars, and a piano keyboard. Being frightened and anxious, Tarigan moved all members of the congregation to the third floor.

The police and the army from the territorial Iskandar Muda Aceh then came to the rescue and guarded Tarigan and his congregation's members as they began to exit the building. Passing the crowd, he calculated that more than 500 people had joined the mob. Despite the advices from the army to Tarigan not to bring anything from the

house, Tarigan still managed to save a few documents: some birth certificates, a marriage certificate, an appointment letter of priesthood, and a government's license to the church.

Tarigan was then transported in an armored car. The crowd was still furious, hurling vulgar words to the car such as: "Bitch, infidel, pollution, and infiltrator to Aceh." Tarigan was brought to a police station in Banda Aceh, where he waited for four hours. The police then decided that Tarigan should stand as a witness to the incident. However, after about an hour, his status was elevated to a 'suspect'. The priest was accused of triggering the mob, by performing prayers in his church (this sounds like the common national scenario befalling the Eden group and Yusman Roy mentioned above).

After a few hours in the police office, Tarigan negotiated with the police to allow some members of the congregation, including his wife and children, to go home. Before me, Tarigan recalled that "some showed depression and therefore vomited." Around 9 PM, Tarigan was also permitted to go home but with the new status of a 'defendant' who have violated the Aceh's order.

A month later, the trial was held. Tarigan was accused of holding prayers which triggered a mob attack. The court fined him 1000 rupiah (1 cent dollar). He, however, paid 500.000 rupiahs (50 dollar)—the only amount Tarigan could afford. However, the attack had left a deep impact upon the members of the congregation due to the traumatic experiences. For the next few months, the church members were always on alert whenever they heard people's steps. They often woke up in the middle of the night, afraid of the sound of passing people. Tarigan and his family also suffered the same trauma.

On July 19, 2013, I went to the church which was attacked by the mob. Tarigan introduced me to the members of the congregation: Mita, Mika, Ipon and Sianturi, who agreed to share their traumatic experiences with me.

Mita, a girl who still studied at the High School in Aceh, told me that during the attack, around forty members of the congregation sung prayers with an electric piano keyboard. Suddenly, some people from outside intruded in the church and smashed many musical instruments with beams and sticks. Her mother tried to stop the intruders, but Mita begged her, screaming loudly and telling her not to do so. In fact, Mita's had father passed away earlier. This time, she did not want to lose her mother. Indeed, the situation was dangerous: "Chairs,

plywood walls, window frames, and other staffs were thrown away. Fifteen members of the congregation escaped to the third floor.”

Ipon, a female member of the congregation originally coming from Papua also told me her story. Before the attack at 10.30, “a man questioned me on whether the church held the government’s permission.” To this, Nipon answered that the church was legal, breaking no Indonesian law. “The GBI is one of the Christian churches which the government protects.” Nipon then asked the man where he came from and for what purpose he posed such a question. The man, however, did not answer but left her immediately.

Mika, another female member of the congregation originally coming from Manado, North Sulawesi, also shared her story to me. A couple of days before the attack, she attended an *arisan* (women gathering) in the Manado circle in Aceh. She, however, felt that “somebody had their eyes on the gathering.” At the end of the meeting, the members of gathering, who were mostly Christians, sung songs together. A group of men then came to them, asking some questions about what activities the gathering did. The host was a widow of an army member who lived in the neighborhood for a long time. The host then called the head of RT (neighborhood) and *kecik* (village leader) to meet the guests. When the group asked whether “the gathering wanted to transform the house into a church, the two village leaders convinced the guests that there was neither intention to do so nor to build a new church.” But the gathering only practiced choir. The two leaders then asked the group to leave and never return to bother the neighborhood again.

Mika also mentioned that a day before the gathering, a couple of young men sat in a café nearby and watched the place of gathering while waiting for a football game in TV. These men seemed to be “the spies or provocateurs, who seemed to be responsible to pinpoint suspicious places and spread rumors about a plan to build a new church in the neighborhood.”

According to Mika’s observation about the attack on the Bethel Church, no perpetrator was a member of the Peneuyong neighborhood, each of whom Mika knows well. She believed that the perpetrators come from outside the area. Before me, she also testified that the neighbors watched, or hid during, the incident. The *kecik* told her that they mostly came from Perlak near Lhoksumawe. The *kecik* also heard the rumor that they had planned the attack in a mosque in

Banda Aceh far away from Peneuyong. Mika also told me that the members of congregation made friendships and built good relations with many Mosques around Peneuyong.

Sianturi, a member of Kodam (territorial army) Iskandar Muda of Aceh, who originally comes from Medan, also attended the sermon during the incident. When he came to the church, Sianturi, like Tarigan, saw a few people sitting on motorcycles in front of the building. Keep in mind that Sianturi is a well-trained soldier who has developed an “instinct” for security. During the prayers, Sianturi went outside the church to check the situation. He then decided to sit down in the first floor, whereas Tarigan led the prayers in the second floor. Suddenly, some people from outside intruded in the church. He saw Ipon was nervous and therefore screaming. Sianturi then checked everybody’s safety. No one was injured. He then called the office of intelligence and of the Territorial Army. Twenty minutes later some polices and armies arrived in, and surrounded, the building. Sianturi then helped 15 members of the congregation to escape from the building.

In the aftermath of the attack, Sianturi still received some threats through SMS (Short Message System), warning that if the congregation still used the same building to perform their prayers, the mob was ready to besiege it again. Indeed, in the wake of the incident, the congregation decided to move from one place to another. They kept their place of worship a secret. But each member was informed before Sunday where they would perform prayers. Once, Tarigan told me some places which were often used for prayers: Sulthan hotel, Hermes hotel, and Wisma Angkatan Udara (Airforce complex) in Jalan Pringgondani, which seems to be the safest place—a similar tactic employed by some Christian congregations in Java mentioned above (see also Crouch 2010).

The above accounts echo the national narratives of the gloomy relations between Muslims and Christians during the New Order and the reform period in the following ways. Firstly, the attack on the Bethel church in Penayuong recalls the old Muslims’ anxiety of building a church. This is clearly expressed in their accusation against the church of having no government’s permission. Secondly, from the testimonies above, we can conclude that the attack on the church was well-panned. Ipon, Mika, and Sianturi testified that certain spies monitored the neighbourhood and pointed the suspected and targeted

place to be attacked. Thirdly, like in the national level scenario during the reform era, in the aftermath of the attack the victims (Tarigan) were victimized, whereas the perpetrators (the mob) were set free and there is no attempt to bring them to the court trial for justice.

Nevertheless, the below interviews with Muslims leaders will give us a more detailed local narratives behind the attack on the church, where the issues of identity, sharia, and Christianization are intertwined.

The Acehne Muslims' narratives: Fear of Christianization

The following narratives provided by Muslim leaders with various affiliations—the FPI, MAA (*Majelis Adat Aceh*/Customary Aceh Council), RTA (*Rabithat Taliban Aceh*/Aceh Student Association), PII (*Pelajar Islam Indonesia*/Indonesian Islamic Students), DDII (*Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia*/Indonesian Islamic Call Council), Adidharma Senior High School, and WI (*Wanita Indonesia*/Indonesian Women)—support my earlier hypothesis on the sharia implementation leading to the novel formulation of Islamic identity among the Acehne Muslims yielding their fear of rumors of Christianization. All of these informants are carefully selected to represent Muslims' voice among the elites, whom I mostly met in Banda Aceh. The formulation of identity marks the dividing line between we 'Muslims' and others 'non-Muslims' in the following ways. Firstly, all of these leaders eagerly support the implementation of sharia and at the same time hold fear of Christian missionaries, assumed to have operated in Aceh particularly in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster. Secondly, they pointed out that the Christian missionary was masked in the aid programs given to the Acehne victims. One informant, that is Tarmizi, was likely involved in, or at least supported, the Bethel church's attack, a conclusion that can be drawn from his interview below. Thirdly, some informants also link the missionary activities to deviant sects, such as Millata Abraham. Others, on the other hand, believed that foreign countries had intention of obstructing the implementation of sharia in Aceh through Christian missionaries. Once again, Islamic identity in this vein is marked with a strong dividing line between we Muslims and others non-Muslims, including not only the Christians but also the Muslim groups which they branded deviant. Fourthly, some informants also relate a conspiracy theory by which the two groups (Christians and deviant groups) formed an alliance to obstruct the

implementation of sharia and to ultimately destroy Muslims in the region.

To begin with, I interviewed Tarmizi,³⁷ one of the board leaders of the FPI of Aceh. Tarmizi is a staunch supporter of *shariah kaffah* in Aceh, a term by which he meant as a total implementation of Shariah in all aspects of life. At the same time, Tarmizi held this fear that Christian and Jewish missionaries harbored a mission to convert Acehese into their religions. To prevent this from happening, Tarmizi confessed that he, and his organization, was involved in closing some “illegal churches.” To present his words,

It is the FPI which has unmasked their (Christians) faces. 15 illegal churches were closed down by force. Usually they (Christian missionaries) built stores, but then were used as places of worship too, one of which was found in Lamara, which then was transformed into a sub-district office (after a mass protest). There is CWS (Catholics World Service) operating in Aceh, with its international mission. First the Service gave aids to Acehese. But, we consider these aids as proofs of their missionary activities. Then, some people (got angry) and then burnt (the offices). The mayor of Aceh and governor were then involved in mediating (the Acehese and Christians).

The quotation implies that Christians are not Acehese but outsiders, and not part of the Islamic Acehese identity formulation. As outsiders, the Christians, for Tarmizi, have attacked the Acehese Islamic faith, whereas the Acehese, as the FPI did, defended themselves against the infiltrators. As also mentioned by the victims above, Tarmizi accused some churches of being illegal and having no government’s license. He further clarified that among 20 churches in Banda Aceh, 15 them were considered illegal. Likewise, Singkil has 27 churches, 7 of which are illegal. In guarding this Islamic identity,

³⁷ Tarmizi finished his Elementary and Secondary schools in Bireuen and then went to Islamic Senior High School (*Madrasah Aliyah*) in Samalang, and finished his BA and MA in IAIN (State Institute of Islamic Studies) Ar-Raniry Darussalam at the department of Tafsir Hadits (Quranic exegesis and prophet tradition). He is currently finishing his Ph.D program at the same Institute. Tarmizi joined the FPI in 2006, during which the Front dominated the national media with the news of its mass rallies protesting *ma’siyat* (sinful deeds) found across many cities in Java. According to Tarmizi, the Aceh FPI attracts at least 1000 members, mostly university students, but only 200 of whom remain active in the Front.

Tarmizi stressed that “the FPI is undeterred to besiege the churches,” as the government of Aceh showed hesitance to deal with them, and never dared to warn these churches.

According to Tarmizi, like Jewish missionaries, Christian missionaries adopted a clandestine tactic (*terselubung*). They built offices for business, which are in fact used as places of worship. The FPI for Tarmizi did not commit violence, but adopted a stern attitude. From the interview, Tarmizi confessed honestly that the FPI was involved in many mobs wanting to close down these places of worship, including Tarigan’s church. In Tarmizi’s words,

(The government of) Indonesia (often) shows a weak and soft attitude (towards other faiths), so that many unexpected groups and activities have taken place, like in Aceh. The FPI decided to go to the ground. We have informants, who, like intelligent or spies, investigate (suspected places). We built networks in communities. We collected data of the houses suspected to become places of worships. We negotiated with them and reported to the local authorities. But when nothing happened, we went to the field. When the government did nothing, we, with the help of community, did the (government’s duty).

Tarmizi’s words confirm what Tarigan, Mika, and Sianturi said earlier about certain ‘spies’ looking for suspicious places of worship in their neighborhood as objects of the mob attacks. Tarmizi then went on that the FPI sought the government’s support, which they got. He also told me about the process of mediation between the ‘Acehnese’ and ‘Christians.’ Before Walikota (the city mayor), Sekda (*Sekretaris Daerah*/Secretary of the Region), and some Islamist activists, the priests of the churches were forced to sign an agreement, not to continue the activities of the deemed ‘illegal churches,’ which should be shut down afterwards. In a meeting, most of the priests, but Ali Gunawan from Medan with the support of a lawyer, signed. Tarmizi also testified that the Mayor and the Regional Secretary warned Gunawan if he refused to sign, the city would be irresponsible for his congregation’s security—a threat to which Gunawan finally succumbed.

Tarmizi then explained that the Jewish and Christian missions came to Aceh adopting the same strategy of giving aid to the tsunami victims. They declared in the beginning that their aid was on behalf of

humanity. But in fact, they spread their faith. Tarmizi saw many books containing the stories of Jesus and Virgin Mary distributed among kindergartens in Nehen (Aceh Besar), Takengon (Central Aceh), and Meulaboh (West Aceh). Tarmizi also claimed that Medan and Surabaya priests baptized some Achenese Muslims.

Tarmizi is critical towards the Indonesian government which does not pay attention to the missionary activities, which, for him, broke one of the state's laws, which prohibits any attempt to convert those who have embraced a certain religion into another religion. Tarmizi also saw that Christian missions were masked with NGOs, such as CWS (Christian World Service). In Aceh, some Christians founded a reading circle like *Yayasan Cinta Baca* (the Institute of Love Reading), which still can be found in Lamlagang (Banda Aceh), to whose board the FPI also once gave warning.

I also interviewed Sanusi, the head of MAA (*Masyarakat Adat Aceh/Aceh Custom Society*),³⁸ who, like Tarmizi, is also an ardent supporter of the implementation of sharia in Aceh. For him, the Acehese *adat* and sharia has perfectly mingled, so much so that one cannot differentiate between the two. For Sanusi, the Acehese *adat* is simply sharia. Like Tarmizi, Sanusi also fears Christian missionaries. In this regard, he also suspected some NGOs' activists in Aceh, who, according to him, only served as vehicles for Christian missionaries. Sanusi also commented on the attack on the Bethel church in Penaeyung, in which he took part in helping the congregation's members from the mob's anger. However, the priest Tarigan then asked for help from Medan. Sanusi also took another role as a mediator between the mob leaders and the congregation. Finally, an agreement was signed, leading to the freedom of the priest from the court's accusation.

In Sanusi's eyes, the church was illegal. Furthermore, Sanusi also suspected a few other Christians opening public prayers. According to him, they wanted nothing but to spread their faith to other Muslim Acehese. For this reason, Sanusi regards the mob attack as unsurprising.

³⁸ Sanusi gained his BA from the Tarbiyah (Education) Faculty of the IAIN Ar-Raniry. Since 1971, he was active in the Golkar Party (Functional Party), the ruling party during the New Order period. Not only did he serve as an advisor to the Aceh governor Abdullah Puteh, but he was also a close friend to another governor Irwandi Yusuf.

In explaining the clandestine Christian missionary, Sanusi also mentioned that some priests living in Penueyong communicated well with the villagers and thus made friendship with them. They founded a kindergarten, music band, and restaurant, which were coordinated under the umbrella of a *Yayasan* (Foundation). Sanusi believed that the *Yayasan* has sufficient financial support, through which they also educated farmers to plant rice, bought some *becak* (pedicabs), by which they gave some young Acehnese new jobs. They also founded an NGO called “Care.” However, due to mass protests, all of these were closed down (as Tarmizi mentioned above). Sanusi recalled that one of the priests Darmin Sembiring has moved to Yogyakarta.

According to Sanusi, Christian missionary activities were carried out particularly in the wake of the tsunami disaster. Some packaged aids were accompanied with books containing Christian teachings, holy crosses, and other symbols of Christianity. Once, many Acehnese tried to separate the aids and symbols, but they failed. For example, Sanusi saw candies wrapped with plastics with the pictures of Christian crosses, due to which Sanusi concluded that the clandestine missionary were behind the aids. Sanusi also drew another illustration that some priests collected young men in a cafe during the times of Islamic prayers, preventing them to perform the Islamic duty.

I went to Abdullah Atibi’s³⁹ house, the vice chairman of the MPU (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama*/Ulama Consultative Council) of Aceh, which is the most important institution which supports the implementation of sharia (Icwan 2011, p. 198). Like Tarmizi and Sanusi, Atibi also suspected the Christian missionary of operating in the aftermath of tsunami disaster. Atibi also mentioned that holy crosses, Bibles, and Christian books were inserted in their aids. He likened the missionaries to “*memancing di air keruh*” (fishing in the murky water). Once during a Bappeda meeting (local government), Atibi proposed to establish an independent body with the aim to investigate all aids from outside Aceh, particularly from foreign countries—an idea with which nobody agreed. They all argued that all aid poured into Aceh came from people with sincere hearts, to whom the Acehnese should be grateful. However, Atibi believed that their views were misleading, drawing to the fact that, “some children have

³⁹ Atibi finished his BA from the IAIN Ar-Raniry and Master Degree from Unsyiah (Universitas Syiah Kuala) at the Faculty of Education. Atibi has joined the MPU of Banda Aceh since 2002.

been baptized.” The aid issue mentioned by Tarmizi, Sanusi, and Atibi recalls the old remark by a young Muhammadiyah leader Lukman Harun during the 1967 parliamentary session who also suggested the government to regulate financial support from abroad to churches in Indonesia⁴⁰ (Mujiburrahman 2006, p. 31).

Nonetheless, Atibi linked the effort of Christiniization to the case of deviant sect, Millata Abaraham, which in 2010 started to promote a more inclusive Semitic religion in Aceh, by mixing the teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As per its name, the group called upon people to return to a more universal teaching of Abrahamic roots. A year later, the Aceh local authority arrested the leader, Jamaluddin with 125 followers, who was also forced to sign a letter stating that he and his followers would repent and return to Islam. In this vein, Atibi took part in forcing them to repent under the guidance of the head of the Aceh MPU Muslim Ibrahim.

Interestingly, Atibi also related another evidence of Christianization in the national level, that is a Christian Ahok Cahyo Purnama was elected as the Jakarta’s vice-governor. Atibi, in this vein, also underscores that the popular capital city’s governor Jokowi (Joko Widodo) embraces Javanese syncretic Islam, not pure Islam. Moreover, he also underscores that in Aceh, some Chinese Christians of Penauyong has become members of the local parliament. For Atibi, both the central and local government of Aceh adopted too soft an attitude towards Christian missionaries. It is clear that Atibi echoed the old prejudice and fear of Christian missionaries circulating in the Indonesian society since the New Order period now again perceived as a threat to the Acehese Islamic faith.

At the IAIN Ar-Raniry campus, I also interviewed Hasan,⁴¹ one of the leaders of DDII (*Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia*/Indonesian Islamic Call Council).⁴² Before me, Hasan said that *pibak asing* (foreign power)

⁴⁰ Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia’s New Order*, 31.

⁴¹ Hasan gained his BA from the Sharia faculty of the IAIN Ar-Raniry, MA from the International Islamic University of Malaysia, and is still finishing his Ph.D dissertation about politics at the University of Sabah Malaysia. He is also currently a lecturer at the Shariah faculty of IAIN Ar-Raniry.

⁴² The DDI started to come to Aceh in May 1991. Hasan told me that the DDII has more than 1000 members, spreading across 23 districts of Aceh. But only about 18 branches remain active.

are not content with the implementation of sharia in Aceh. He saw two efforts to obstruct the sharia implementation, that is Christian missionary and deviant sects sent to and developed in Aceh. Like Tarmizi, Sanusi, and Atibi, Hasan also told me about some books with Christian symbols packed in boxes, sent through the post to Aceh. Hasan also mentioned some illegal churches built in Singkil. A missionary kindergarten was open in Meulauboh, where an American family was expelled due to its missionary effort. A Muslim woman was baptized, a news which the Media leaked. She then returned to Islam. In Bener Meriah, Central Aceh, two people converted to Christianity. In the beginning they were brought to Medan to learn farming. But in Brastagi they were baptized. The police caught them in Biruen and forced them to return to Islam. For Hasan, some NGOs also harbor clandestine missions of apostasy. He concluded that all obstructions of the implementation of sharia came from 'foreign countries.' To make shariah implementation in Aceh is one of their goals. Once again, in Hasan's eyes, the central government did nothing to stop the Christian missionaries.

I also visited Adidharma Senior High School⁴³ in Banda Aceh, where I interviewed two teachers, Fahrurizal and Jamaludin. Fahrurizal⁴⁴ who, like other informants above, believed in the Christian missionary operating in Aceh especially in the aftermath of tsunami. Of the strategies is adopting many Acehnese orphans resulting from the natural disaster. Fahrurizal, like Sanusi, also believed that many Christian missionaries approached teenagers with a warm attitude in an effort to gain sympathy from them, with the goal of eventually converting them to Christians. Jamaluddin,⁴⁵ also believed in the Christian missionary operating in Aceh. He pointed out that the missionary founded a kindergarten, bringing some Christian books, containing the story of Jesus. Jamaluddin, like Hasan, pinpointed to the foreign hands in polluting the Islamic faith of the Acehnese. Like,

⁴³ Adidharma high school was founded in 1960 and currently has about 6 classes with each having 150 students.

⁴⁴ Fahrurizal was educated in Dayah (traditional Islamic boarding school) Zulfan Wandu, Raudlatul Qur'an in Tungkup Aceh Besar, finished his BA at the IAIN Ar-Raniry, taking Tarbiyah Faculty.

⁴⁵ Jamaluddin finished Dayah Salafi Darul Huda, Teluk Nibung, Lung Angin, North Aceh and finished his BA from the Syariah Faculty, the IAIN Ar-Raniry.

Atibi, he also related the Christian mission to the deviant sect Millata Abraham.

I also came to the office of the youth organization RTA (*Rabithat Taliban Aceh*/Student Association of Aceh), where I met Teuku Zulkhoiri,⁴⁶ the head of the research and development section. He, like other informants above, also believed in the mission of Christianization through aid program in the wake of tsunami.

Another youth organization which I visited was the PII (Pelajar Islam Indonesia/Indonesian Islamic Students), where I met Ahmad Yanis,⁴⁷ the head of Dakwah (Islamic call) and training section. Yanis, like Atibi, related the Christian missionary to the deviant sect Millata Abraham. He told me that his friend in Unsyiah had converted to the sect. He believed that the Millata Abraham was created by America or Jewish foundation to disturb Islam in Aceh. He heard that Christian missions operated in the border areas of Aceh and Medan. He also recalled that in the wake of the tsunami the government of Indonesia formed an investigation body which found proof of Christianization blanketed under the aid program (as mentioned by Sanusi above). Some Christian books for children, Bibles, and healing therapies were found. Yanis told me that some Muslims were apostatized.

I also met Ariwani,⁴⁸ the head of WI (Wanita Indonesia/-Indonesian Women), who believed in the Christian missionary hypothesis. Ariwani pointed out that young Acehese who had memorized the Qur'an had subsequently converted to Christianity and become priests. She said that about 600 Acehese were trained in Java and Medan. She also mentioned Yayasan Sukma, belonging to Surya Paloh, intruded by a Christian staff. She reiterated the abovementioned

⁴⁶ Zulkhoiri finished his Elementary and High schools in the North Aceh and then took BA from a private Islamic Institute of Al-Kudwah Depok, West Java. He is currently finishing his Master degree at the IAIN Ar-Raniry.

⁴⁷ Yanis entered the PII in 2005, when he was still a student at a Senior High School in Lokshumawe. Now he is taking an undergraduate program at the Shariah faculty of IAIN Ar-Raniry.

⁴⁸ Ariwani is a graduate of the Sharia faculty of the IAIN Ar-Raniry, a former member of Aceh parliament from the party of PBB (Crescent Star Party), an expert advisor of Aceh governor, and currently a candidate of local parliament from the National Democratic Party, founded and led by Surya Paloh. Since 1990s Ariwani has joined the WI (founded in 1962 in Yogyakarta). From 2000 to the present she has served as the head (three times election) of the WI.

informants' opinions suggesting that from Kindergarten to Primary School (SMP) Christian books were distributed.

The above Muslims' narratives corroborate the narratives provided for by the victims presented earlier about the issues of illegal churches and the well-planned attack on the church in Penayuong, preceded by the role of certain spies monitoring the targeted places. The motivation behind this is their fear of Christianization, which belongs to the national narrative in the national circulation since the New Order period. However, the resurgence of novel Islamic identity formulation belongs to the local Acehese narrative, as it is related to the current sharia implementation in the region and especially in the aftermath of tsunami. The narratives above clearly relates the fear of Christianization to the aid given by outsiders to the Acehese victims of the disaster. Interestingly, some informants above also relate a conspiracy theory by which the Christianization missionary and 'deviant' Muslim groups form an alliance to obstruct the implementation of sharia. In addition, this identity formulation is further strengthened by their suspicion of foreign intervention in obstructing the Acehese' effort of sharia implementation.

Dismissing the Rumor

The following Islamic leaders—affiliated with Unsyiah, Baitussalam mosque, FIRLA (Forum Rahmatan Lil Alamin/Blessing for Universe Forum), and the Aceh Institute—disagreed with their abovementioned counterparts believing in the Christian missionary operating in Aceh, a mere rumor and prejudice of Muslims to other people with different faith which fail to show any proof. Interestingly, they also adopted a critical attitude towards the implementation of sharia in Aceh. They also pinpointed the recent sharia euphoria as the main cause behind the spreading of rumors of Christianization and discrimination against minorities, which led to, for instance, the attack on the churches and deviant sects.

To begin with, in a car repair shop in Banda Aceh, I met Saleh Sjafei, a lecturer of Fisip (Faculty of Social and Political Sciences) at the Unsyiah.⁴⁹ To him, the rumor of Christian missionary operating in Aceh is no different from similar rumor of Islamization in Indonesia (recalling Mujiburrahman's and Hoon's thesis mentioned above). It

⁴⁹ Sjafei finished his BA at the Unsyiah, MA and Ph.D at the Indonesian University (UI) of Jakarta in Sociology.

should be borne in mind that both Islam and Christianity are religions with missionary, whose leaders bear duty to attract more people to convert to their faith. As Muslims perform their duty to do *dakwah* (Islamic call), one may also question why Muslims prevents the followers of other religions from doing the same duty. Sjafei therefore argued that as long as the Christian missionary or Islamic *dakwah* does not violate the law or bother other people, both activities should be accepted.⁵⁰ But he highlights that all of the rumors remain rumors. So far, he did not find any strong evidence of apostasy, conversion, or illegal churches being built in stores or any other buildings. Sjafei underscores that all suspicions to other faiths are mostly based on mere prejudices of one group to other groups.

Sjafei also believed that some people were mobilized and provoked to besiege some churches. In fact, they understand neither the purpose of their activities nor the real situation. Certain people took advantages of their negative sentiments and displayed anger to those of other faiths. Sjafii believed that the mass or mob did not realize what they were doing.

The same rings true with the rumor of deviant sects which displayed a more political motivation than showing the real issue facing the Acehese. In fact, Sjafii is more concerned about radicalization and the conservative movement in Aceh, promoted, for instance, by the FPI.

I also visited the mosque Baitussalam, where I met Muhammad,⁵¹ a regular preacher of the mosque and other mosques in Banda Aceh. Baitussalam, founded in 1995, is a place of prayer for 200 people led regularly by five imams (preachers), one of whom was Muhammad. Muhammad, like Sjafei, believed that Christianization is a mere rumor appearing in the wake of the tsunami disaster. For him, there had been no problem with Christians living in Aceh before the disaster. He also saw that the issue of building of churches has become political issue for local and national politicians, who took the benefits from the issue for political purposes. In fact, the local and national government

⁵⁰ In fact, there was also an effort of Christian missionary by South Korean activists, which the Indonesian Christians themselves opposed (Seo 2013, pp. 35-36). This picture is of course different from the narratives conveyed by some informants who fear the clandestine American or European missionary covered with aids given to the tsunami victims mentioned above.

⁵¹ Muhammad holds Ph.D from UPM (Putra Malaysia University).

played too little a role in suppressing the rumor for the sake of a peaceful Aceh.

I also interview Tengku Muhammad Jafar⁵² an NGO activist at the FIRLA, who participated in monitoring the burning incident of Tengku Ayub Dayah, who was accused of promoting deviant teachings of Islam. In February 2013, he was also active in monitoring the burning of another deviant Dayah belonging to Tengku Mualimin, accused of abandoning Friday prayers. To Jafar, the euphoria of the sharia implementation in Aceh played a critical role in escalating the tension between Muslims and people with other faiths. He observed the increase of prejudices and attacks on minority groups in 2007, 2008, 2010, with its peak of disbanding the Millata Abraham sect (as mentioned by Atibi and Yanis above). Indeed, the shariah euphoria has a negative impact on minorities. Jafar concluded that the attacks on some 'illegal' churches cannot be separated from the euphoria of sharia.

I also went to the Baiturrahman grand mosque of Aceh, where I interviewed Sukurdi,⁵³ an NGO activist at the Aceh Institute. Sukurdi agreed with Jafar's conclusion that the issue of shariah implementation has become an effective tool for the local politicians in Aceh to communicate with the people. In fact, shariah is a popular theme among the people, which can be used as an effective communication tool to attract potential voters. Almost all Aceh politicians showed their pro-shariah voices (as Ariwani's stance shown above). Indifference to sharia implementation will cost the politicians' legitimacy⁵⁴ (see also Ichwan 2011, p. 204). Sukurdi underscored that Shariah has become the common language understood by the

⁵² Jafar went to the Elementary and High schools in Sabang and gaining his BA from the Shariah Faculty of the IAIN Arraniry, and still finishing Master at the same Institute—agreed with Muhammad on the politicization of Christian missionary rumors and deviant sects in Aceh. Jafar was also active in the leftist organization SMUS (*Solidaritas Mahasiswa ke Rakyat/Students Solidarity to the People*) and is still currently active in the FIRLA (*Forum Islam Rahmatan Lil Alamin/Islamic Forum for Blessing the Universe*), and JMPSPS (*Jaringan Masyarakat Sipil Peduli Syariah/Civil Network Care of Sharia*). FIRLA was founded in 2011.

⁵³ Sukurdi, owning a kiosk close to the grand mosque, finished his BA at the Dakwah Faculty of the IAIN Ar-Raniry, and MA at the Education faculty of the Unsyiah.

⁵⁴ Ichwan, "Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization: The Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, Shariatization and Contested Authority in Post-New Order Aceh," 204.

politicians and constituents. Due to the sharia ‘fever’ and the trend of showing piety in public, prejudices to the people with other faiths has also increased.

For Sukurdi, Christian missionary in the wake of tsunami disaster is nothing but a mere rumor circulating in the local political context of Aceh. Some (like the informants above) relate the missionary to aids given to the Acehese—a rumor which, for Sukurdi, fails to show any proof. To describe the rumors, Sukurdi illustrated an analogy that if Muhammadiyah or NU, the two largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia, gave aid to victims, these two would put stickers or stamps of the organizations in the boxes. This was also the case of Christian foundations, which put stickers, symbols, or stamps in their boxes containing aid. But the Acehese people have misunderstood this, imagining that the foundations harbor a clandestine Christian missionary. Sukurdi also stressed that it is impossible for Christian organizations, or also Muslim organizations, to discard their stickers in the boxes in the first place before giving the aid to the victims. Sukurdi heard that some people tried to discard the symbols belonging to the International Red Cross, which look like Christian cross. But the symbols are put in almost all boxes containing foods, kitchen utensils, and medicines. They, of course, failed to remove these symbols (as testified by Sanusi above).

Sukurdi stressed that a religious symbol is a sensitive issue in Aceh. Some cannot see any cross in their homes. Sukurdi also mentioned that few Christian organizations taught songs which sounded like gospel hymns. Once again, singing like in a choir is part of their tradition, and is not necessarily related to religious prayers. One cannot assume that they were spreading their faiths. In fact, they helped the victims of tsunami to forget the tragedy by singing the songs. Sukurdi also remarked that a certain foundation also donated some coloring books for kindergarten, with the pictures of castles which look like churches—a simple news which became a rumor circulating in Aceh suggesting that the foundation taught children to draw churches. In fact, they brought the books from their country, perhaps European country, with pictures commonly found in their country. In short, Sukurdi dismissed all abovementioned prejudices and rumors.

As far as Sukurdi is concerned, Aceh is a home to different churches: HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan), Catholic, Advent, and GBI. Each church is a place for worship for a certain synod, and

no member of another synod can use the church of others. In other words, one sect has its own church. This case is different from NU and Muhammadiyah, whose members can use each other's mosques freely. The Bethel congregation, for instance, had no church, and cannot join the others' church. However, when the Bethel congregation found a place of worship, they were accused of building an illegal church (victims' testimonies and Tarmizi's confessions are worth recalling here). This is the problem with regard to the issue of illegal church in Aceh.

Sukurdi also pinpointed the MPU which pronounced some edicts of deviant to some groups and related Christian missionary to these deviant sects, and missionary to humanitarian aids for tsunami victims (as mentioned by Atibi above), as playing a vital role in fueling the prejudices among the Acehnese. In fact, the people took the MPU's messages at face values. For Sukurdi, the MPU should pronounce better edicts with a better formulation. Rather than denouncing those who deviated from Islam, the MUI should approach and educate them, through dialogue between Muslims and deviant sects, and mosques and churches.

Like Jafar, Sukurdi also pointed to shariah euphoria which played a vital factor leading to anarchism, mass mobilization, and attacks on minorities. He took an illustration of an old cinema building close to the grand mosque Baiturrahman. After the implementation of sharia, the building was demolished. Societal prejudice against those of other faiths also increased. Such attitudes has led to screening, and other monitoring activities against sharia being on the rise. Before the tsunami, a number of music concerts, including rock and *dangdut* (Indonesian music), were often held in Aceh. But after the sharia euphoria, there was a rule to divide female and male audiences during the concerts. This mentality has extended to many night cafes; after the implementation of sharia, no woman dares to go to these cafes, clearly reducing the cafes' customers and thus profits.

Sukurdi's colleague at the Aceh Institute, Al Kaf⁵⁵ recalled that since the sharia implementation, as the central government's compensation

⁵⁵ Al Kaf obtained his MA from the UIN (State Islamic University) Yogyakarta and has been joining the Aceh Institute since 2005, is also an activist of the Yayasan Pendidikan Ali Hasyimi (Education Institute of Ali Hasyimi). He described himself before me as a caller for prayers in the grand mosque Baiturrahman. His father and grandfather were ulama (religious scholars). I met Al Kaf at the Shariah Faculty of IAIN Ar-Raniry, a place where he also teaches.

to the rebel party GAM⁵⁶, conservatism has grown in Aceh⁵⁷. In 2006 he was involved in a program developed in a *Dayah* (traditional Islamic boarding school) where he showed himself to the *Dayah* people as a liberal young Muslim. Nobody criticized his stance, as Aceh used to be “cosmopolitan,” in which Liberal views were tolerated. However, in 2011, when he wrote a status in Facebook with a liberal tone, he was attacked and accused of being deviant. On the one hand, Al Kaf stated that shariah indeed tamed the local rebels’ spirit against the central government. On the other hand, the real conflict remains and is localized in Aceh, leaving the central government free from interfering and direct responsibility. Al Kaf, like Sukurdi and Sjafei above, also remarked that in the era of shariatization, religiosity and piety have become means of local politicians in the public appearances. Issues, such as Christian missionary and deviant sects, can be used by politicians to show their voices before their constituents.

In agreement with Sjafie’s view above, Al Kaf also said that like Islam, Christianity is a missionary religion, whose leaders want to attract more people to their faith. But, the rumor circulating in Aceh fails to describe the true reality. The truth is that in the border of Aceh and North Sumatera live many Christians.⁵⁸ However, the rumor spreading in Banda Aceh is that they just converted into Christianity. In fact, they have embraced Christianity long before sharia implementation in the province of Aceh. Misunderstanding played a greater role. Al Kaf also heard many people talking about the garden in Banda Aceh square which resembles that of Vatican city, a big yard with a playground, misunderstood as a symbol of Christianization. What is more, a mosque in Meulaboh is suspected of being installed with a David star, a Jewish symbol.

⁵⁶ Ichwan, “Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization: The Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, Shariatization and Contested Authority in Post-New Order Aceh,” 198.

⁵⁷ Feener, *Sharia and Social Engineering, the Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh*, 19.

⁵⁸ It is noteworthy that North Sumatera is a home to the largest number of Christian population, churches, and schools of Christian education in Indonesia (Seo 2013, pp. 22-26). German and Dutch missionaries started to enter the region since the Dutch colonial era (Aritonang 1994; Kipp 1990; Hasselgren 2000; Mujiburrahman 2010; van Klinken 2003, pp. 12-13, 68-80).

The above interviews support my argument mentioned above that sharia implementation has become an impulse to the new identity formulation among the Acehnese Muslims. They emphasize their Islamic identity which excludes non-Muslims. This also in fact increases discrimination against non-Muslims and Muslims groups who are accused of being deviant. The attack on the Bethel church is one of the consequences of the resurgence of identity formulation. Most of these informants are intellectuals, NGO activists, whose views are different from those of politicians earlier who support sharia implementation. They are critical towards rumors of shariatization and Christianization. The politicians, on the other hand, follow the popular narratives of Christianization circulating in the society and perhaps even use them to support their political agenda.

Conclusion

In looking at the narratives of the attack on the Bethel church in Penayuong Aceh coming from both the victims and Muslims' responses to it, the two narratives—national level and local level—intertwined. The accounts of Christianization—Christian missionary blanketed with aids—belong to the national narrative of Muslims' prejudice against Christians in Indonesia. So do the story of attacks on minorities, deviant sects, sufi groups, and the destruction of Christians churches. The accounts provided for by the informants who support sharia implementation and who also hold the fear of Christian missionary is nothing new in the Indonesian context. In 1967, the parliamentary debates have revealed the dilemmatic relationship between religious freedom, Christianization, and Islamization at the national level. Nevertheless, some radical and conservative groups—such as FPI, HTI, and MPU (MUI), commonly found in Java—also played a vital role in enforcing conservatism and the growth of orthodoxy in Aceh. From the interviews, we see that some also questioned the legality of the building used by the Bethel congregation in Penayoung, similar voices commonly heard across Java during many mob actions. The attack on the Bethel church also reveals a similar end of the common story found elsewhere in Java in which the victims were criminalized, whereas there is no attempt to bring the perpetrators to court for justice.

Local narratives can be found in the above interviews which relate the attack on the Bethel church in Aceh to the role of sharia implementation which is part of the Islamic Acehnese identity by

which some informants above stressed the difference between we ‘Muslims’ and others ‘non-Muslims.’ With this, those who were considered untrue to Islam, whether they were from deviant sects or Christians, had no place in the resurgence of identity formulation. In this regard, the implementation of sharia in Aceh which raises the revival of Islamic Acehnese identity demands ‘homogeneity’ and opposes ‘plurality’ in the society, casting the dark side of sharia for minorities. Simply put, non-Muslims are excluded in the novel Islamic Acehnese identity formulation in the wake of tsunami disaster. It also stands to reason to further conclude that the sharia implementation in Aceh yields only a gloomy future for non-Muslims and other minorities.

Nevertheless, formal educational background seems to play the least significant role, as almost all informants above went through the same Islamic higher education (IAIN) but embraced at least two different views with regards to sharia and Christianization: those who support the implementation of sharia hold the fear of Christianization and those who adopt a critical attitude to sharia dismisses them as mere rumors. Apparently, most local politicians and religious leaders belong to the first group. On the other hand, besides the Unsyiah and Baitussalam mosque, the NGOs, particularly the Aceh Institute or FIRLA, play a certain role in nurturing the critical attitude among the NGO activists towards sharia implementation. The question, however, remains as to the extent that critical thinking can be shared by the rest of the Acehnese people.[]

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