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# Islamic Arts and the Expression of Theology: Acehnese Traditional House, Its Ornamentation and Figurative Motifs

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## ABSTRACT

*As cultural expression, Islamic arts are coloured by the theologies of the different Islamic sects. However, the discussion of the cultural expressions such as living images and their links to theological expressions has received little attention of scholars. With respect to this, two distinctive views on living images have emerged, including the salafist and the traditionalist views. The salafist view tends to reject living images as the expressions of Islamic arts, whereas traditionalists recognise living images as part of Islamic expressions of arts. This article attempts to demonstrate the modes of living images, which are argued as part of Acehnese Islamic arts and are used in the traditional houses of Rumoh Aceh. Based on a semiotic analysis of the images and historical approach to Rumoh Aceh ornamentation, I argue that earlier motifs of Acehnese ornamentation reflect the salafist view that insists on Arabic calligraphic, geometric and flowery motifs. However, during the colonial period and the 20th century, Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation has been greatly influenced by the traditionalist theology arts. This is evidenced by the use of animal images, like burraqs, peacocks, pigeons and ducks. This study is significant in that it can contribute to the understanding of the nature of Acehnese arts and Southeast Asian Muslim cultural heritage.*

**Keywords:** *Rumoh Aceh, Islamic arts, Acehnese motifs, living images, traditionalist arts*

## INTRODUCTION

There has been a considerable amount of literature on the Islamic arts (al-Faruqi 1981; 1986; al-Fārūqī 1973; Al-Tauhidie 1953; Duhri 2016; Duhri, Dahlan and Zulfikar 2016; Grabar 1973; 2003; M. Kartomi 2004; Kartomi 2010; Leigh 1982; 1989; 2013; Michon 2008; Muhammad-Isa 1988; Nasr 1982; Taufiq 1998). The literature demonstrates that the study on Islamic arts is problematic. The problems can best be treated under the headings of its definition, its independency and its expression (Grabar 1973). As noted by many scholars, there has been no consensus on the meaning of "Islamic" in the term "Islamic arts".<sup>1</sup> A group of scholars, such as Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1986) and Saed Taufiq (1998) insist that Islamic arts are based on the Quran and hadiths teachings. In other words, the meaning of "Islamic" is identical to "religious". It, therefore, objects to any kind of non-Quranic arts.

The second group of scholars view that Islamic arts do not have a connection to religion. They refer to the civilisation of Muslims. Christians, Jews and people of other religions have also made contributions to the establishment of the Islamic civilisation. Oleg Grabar<sup>2</sup> notes this problem:

"Islamic" does not refer to the art of a particular religion, for a vast proportion of the monuments have little if anything to do with the faith of Islam. Works of art demonstrably made by and for non-Muslims can appropriately be studied as works of Islamic art. There is, for instance, a Jewish Islamic art, since large Jewish communities lived within the predominantly Muslim world and representative examples of this Jewish art have been included in a book on Arab painting. There is also a Christian Islamic art, most easily illustrated by metalwork from the Fertile Crescent in the thirteenth century but known elsewhere as well, for instance in the complex development of Coptic art in Egypt after the seventh century. (Grabar 1973: 1)

The above quote from Grabar represents the common definition of "Islamic" in Islamic arts among scholars such as Michon (2008), Nasr (1987) and Hadi (2000; 2001). Michon identifies this category of arts as traditional arts. He views Islamic arts as the artworks that are only produced by Muslims, regardless of their insistence on Islamic principles of arts or profane arts.

The second problem of Islamic arts relates to their independence and expression. The earliest document on Islamic arts is the *Al-Imta' wa al-Muanasah*, authored by Abu Raihan al-Tauhidie in 360 H. The book does not refer to the fine arts, but to the humanities [*adab*], which concern three major themes: biography of caliphs, Ikhwanu Shafa's letters and mathematics. Al-Tauhidie explicates the arts as part of entertaining and luxurious activities, which are called *Muanasah*/sociability. In the book, arts are considered as an independent branch of knowledge, but only part of the elite lifestyle (Al-Tauhidie 1953). Accordingly, Ibn Khaldun views the art of Arabic calligraphy and ornamentation, as neither pure art nor independent knowledge. He views that artworks are the necessary corollary of civilisation advancement/progression.

There was no pure art known in the history of Muslim civilisation. The arts are only the expressions of theological teaching. Linking to the concern of this article, I am convinced that the Islamic arts are neither an independent branch of knowledge nor a part of branch of knowledge. Looking meticulously to the definition of Islamic Arts and its independency, I argue that art expression is inextricably linked to the shift and development of piety and theology. Islamic arts are dependent on the mode of religiosity and can be possibly divided into two expressions of religiosity, namely: orthodox expression and traditional expression.

There are, however, a few studies on the different theologies that affect the Islamic expression of the arts, such as the salafist and the traditionalist arts. The first category of ulama that advocates orthodox expressions has a strict view on arts which postulates principles and foundations of Islamic arts. They establish that Islamic arts are only compatible to the foundation and principles of Islam. Every artwork that is founded on these principles is therefore Islamic regardless of its geography, ethnicity and locality. This group of ulama believes in the universality of Muslim arts. The best example of this category is al-Faruqi's masterpiece (al-Faruqi 1986), *Cultural Atlas of Islam*. But the second group of ulama views the Islamic arts differently. Traditional ulama believe that the expressions of arts are subjected to locality and subjectivity. Detailed examinations of the traditional Muslim arts by Michon (2008) and Nasr (1987) show that traditionalists accept representational arts, for instance, anthropomorphism and zoomorphism (see explanations of the terms in the next section).

Relying on the historical approach and the method of semiotic analysis, this work critically analyses the motifs, forms and shapes of Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation. In addition to the primary method, I have also used archaeological artefacts, such as the Aceh stone



ornamentation to understand the earliest motifs of Aceh. By using historical and semiotic analysis of Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation, I have decoded the motifs of Rumoh Aceh to answer the questions mentioned previously. Through the semiotic analyses of the artworks relating to Rumoh Aceh, this article has attempted to find the ideological expressions of Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation. For this, I have employed Roland Barthes' (Barthes 1972; 1982) theory of denotation and connotation levels of meaning of various motifs of Rumoh Aceh. I have also used Hall's concepts (Hall 1997) of decoding and coding to analyse the data concerning Rumoh Aceh's motifs and to decode the myth levels of the ornaments.

Analysis of the historical data helped the researcher elucidate the roles that the salafist and traditionalist groups had played in influencing Acehnese artworks and in particular the signification of Rumoh Aceh's ornamentations. Through interview and observation methods (Hyman et al. 1954), I uncovered the reasons for the change of Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation and how the Acehnese artists dealt with Salafist theology. Through the methods of deduction and categorisation, I show the ideological influences upon Acehnese art expressions. The graphical images were used in order to make my argument more understandable and to illustrate a vivid picture of the different characters of the salafist and traditionalist motifs.

## **AGAINST AND FOR ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND ZOOMORPHISM**

The academic literature on arts has revealed the emergence of several contrasting themes. The studies on Islamic arts have shown that there has been no consensus and clear evidence about the differences between the salafist and traditionalist Islamic arts. There are many scholars who believe that Islamic expressions of arts are against images. Kathleen Kuiper (2010), for instance, explains that the prohibition against living images is a principle standard of Islamic arts:

It is equally true that from about the middle of the 8th century a prohibition had been formally stated and thenceforth it would be a standard feature of Islamic thought, even though the form in which it is expressed has varied from absolute to partial and even though it has never been totally followed. (Kuiper 2010: 131).

On the other hand, different perspectives exist in the literature regarding living images. Many scholars, including some sufist teachings, accept living images as the expressions of Islamic arts. Therefore, the discussion on living images, both human images (anthropomorphism) and animal images (zoomorphism) are crucial for understanding the different expressions of Islamic arts. Furthermore, the debate about the acceptance of animal and human images has played a vital role in unearthing the different ideologies of artworks. There are about 14 hadiths (prophetic traditions) concerning living images, which restrict anthropomorphism and zoomorphism.<sup>3</sup> As noted by Muhammad-Isa (1988), many *fuqaha* overlook these hadiths and limit the interpretations only to *muhaditsin* and Sufists. The hadiths provide a departure point to Sufis and muhadisin/Salafists from their conception of Islamic arts. Using the esoteric method, Sufists prefer hidden meanings of the texts and tend to approve living images, whereas Salafists are the proponents of apparent meanings which forbid anthropomorphism and zoomorphism.

Existing studies recognise the critical role played by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi and Muhammad Ibn Wahhab's works on emphasising the prohibition of human and animal images on Islamic visual arts (al-Faruqi 1986; al-Fārūqī 1973; Ali-Irsyad 1960: 31). Several attempts have been made to elaborate comprehensively the Salafi arts. In year 1986, the publication of *Cultural Atlas of Islam* had a major impact on Salafi arts. Al-Fārūqī (1973) has proposed a convincing definition of Islamic arts as the expressions of the Quranic worldview and ideology. Al-Faruqi further proposes three levels of Islamic arts that differ from non-Muslim arts/sufist arts. Firstly, Islamic arts should be the instrument for teaching *tawhid* and Islamic teachings, that is, the expression of arts is the explanation of *tawhid*. Secondly, the al-Quran is a pattern and model of Islamic arts; and finally, the al-Quran is the icon of Islamic arts. For instance, Arabic calligraphy and reciting the al-Quran prescribe *Tajwid* and singing in accordance with the code of *qiraah*. Al-Faruqi views that Islamic arts are the instruments of Islamic ideology, which are based on the al-Quran teaching.

Grounded on al-Quranic texts, al-Faruqi further argues that there are six principles of Islamic arts: abstraction, successive combination, sophisticated, dynamic, modular structure and repetition (al-Faruqi 1986: 165–169). Those principles of Islamic arts establish an anti-naturalistic model of artwork, which accordingly rejects any realistic creation of arts, such as the artistic embodiment of animals and human beings. Al-Faruqi emphasises that the rejection

of animal form of artwork (zoomorphism) and human forms (anthropomorphism) is vital and in line with the principle of tawhid. Therefore, any animal form of artwork is non-Islamic and is against the Quranic/*tawhid* arts. Later, this prohibition has been considered similar to the Wahhabism perspective or salafi arts that are adhered to by some Acehnese people (Ali-Irsyad 1960).

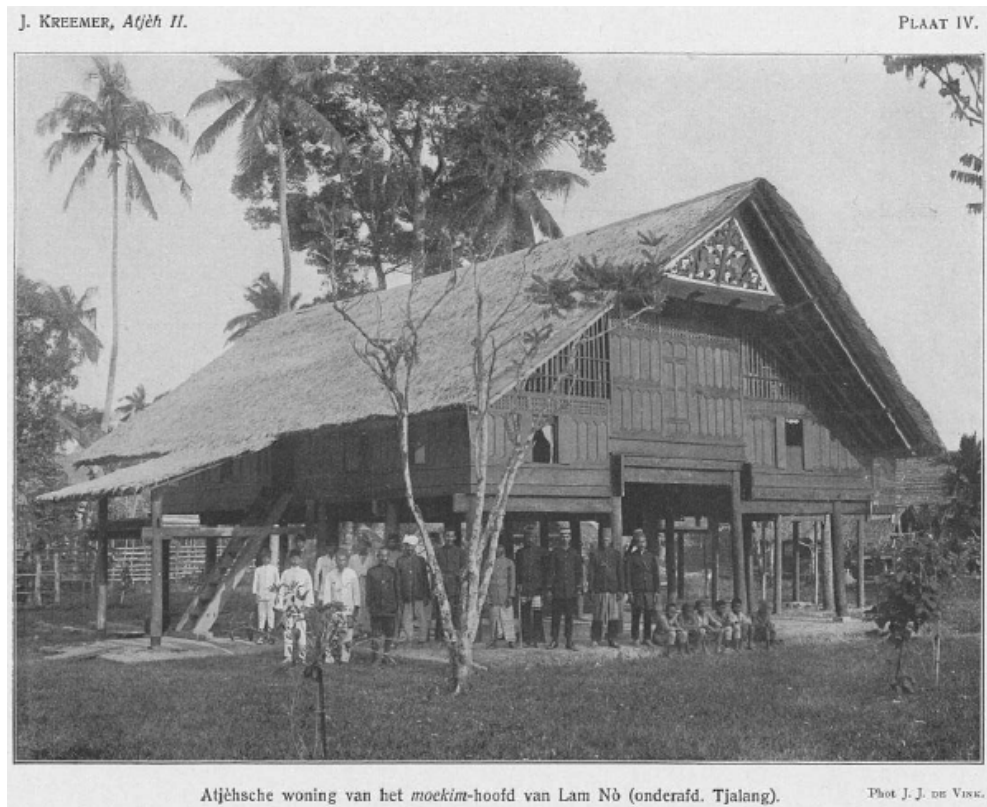
On the other hand, there is another type of visual arts concept in Islam, namely the traditionalist arts or Sufist arts. The visual arts are based on the view that Islamic arts are basically flexible and inclusive of any artwork. This concept simply views Islamic arts as the artworks produced, developed and shared commonly by Muslims (Hadi 2000; 2001; Leaman 2004; Leigh 1989; 2013). The traditionalist artists, therefore, believe in the particularity of Muslim arts. For instance, they see that Moroccan Muslim arts are unique to Egypt Muslim arts and Acehnese Muslim arts are different from Javanese Muslim arts. This traditionalist idea of arts is supported by many sufist views on Islam. The significant differences between the first group and the second one are that the former necessitates distinctive characters and principles of Islamic arts that create the boundary between Islamic arts and non-Islamic arts, whereas the later does not prescribe this boundary.

Richard C. Foltz (2006: 82–84) identifies this category as "the tradition of Muslim representational art", which is opposed to Islamic arts or non-representational arts as explained earlier. He explains that the second group of Islamic arts developed in Iran/Persia and spread over India, Turkey and Central Asia. The main characteristic of this group is in the use of animal images, which can be seen in carpets, metalwork, ceramics and rock engravings. The images of animals appeared in early Islam, starting from the Ummayyad period (660–749 H) and flourished during the period of Turkish Empire (10 H). The common animal themes are lions that represent monarchy and gazelles that symbolise the people. According to Foltz, animal images are not Islamic in origin, they are borrowed from Sasanian or Hellenistic models.

## **HOW RUMOH ACEH ORNAMENTATION DEFINES ACEHNESE PIETY**

Rumoh Aceh, Acehnese ancient gravestones also known as Acehnese stones (Yatim 1988) and old mosque buildings are among the sources of Acehnese ornamentations that are still found in present day Aceh. Rumoh Aceh is the Acehnese traditional house, which is made from wood and has a unique structure. Rumoh Aceh, however, is about to be extinct now as the

traditional house is hardly found in Acehese cities, towns and villages. There are, however, several Rumoh Aceh in present time in some parts of Aceh. Perhaps Pidie region has the most number of Rumoh Aceh compared to the other regions in Aceh. I could not find any Rumoh Aceh in West Aceh, except the one in Seulanteui, Meulaboh (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1** The ornamentation and ornamented sections of Rumoh Aceh in Kreemer's book (1922: 209).

Rumoh Aceh is one of the most important material culture that signifies the issue of Acehness religiosity. Rumoh Aceh ornamentation is the most particular one, since its motifs, designs, shapes and styles are dynamic and responsive to the historical phase of Acehness cultural development and the shift of Acehness religiosity. Yet, very little is found in the literature on the question of Rumoh Aceh ornaments and their relation to piety/religiosity. As one of the leading scholars on Islamic embellishment, Gallop notes:

Little attention has yet been paid to the distinctive, exuberant and culturally self-confident examples of illumination found in Islamic manuscripts from Southeast Asia. The neglect is twofold, from Islamic art historians in general, whose horizons have rarely stretched eastwards past India and from scholars of and from Southeast Asia itself. In the former case, this is probably largely due to the scarcity of published reproductions of fine illuminated manuscripts from the Malay world and their limited presence in Western collections; the best examples are held in Southeast Asian institutions and many of these have only been acquired within the last two decades. In the latter case, the study of manuscripts from the Malay world has traditionally been dominated by philologists, who focus on the text rather than its physical vehicle-the manuscript. (Gallop 2010: 191)

Although there has been little concern on Rumoh Aceh ornamentation, its construction has a key role in representing the culture of the region. Particularly, its construction represents three levels of Acehness cosmology and exemplifies the miniature of Acehness society,<sup>4</sup> as shown by the following maxims:

Koeng rumoh tameh ngon bara Sebab jih meutamah puteing Kong hukum masa Syiah Kuala Sebab adat na digeunireung	The house is strong due to its pillars and cross-beams and the added tenons The Sharia was strong during the reign of Syiah Kuala due the closely supportive custom ( <i>adat</i> )
Menyoe rupet puengong jaroem Meujanthoeng beuneung siurat Menyoe lheuh nibak hukum Meutaren nibak adat	(If needle's eye is awkward the thread is frayed If (one is) freed from the Sharia (he) is inescapable from the <i>adat</i> )
Toei ngoen Rhoek bak Ureung Nanggroe Reuhum bajoe bak ureung tuha Tameih binteih bak ulei balang Beuneung arang bak Ulema	(Cross-beams and joining them are by those in power (King) The mortises are by ureung tuha (a group of wise men) The pillars and walls are by Ulei Balang (aristocrat) The measurement is by ulema)

The above mentioned maxims demonstrate the centrality of the Rumoh Aceh structure and construction in depicting Acehnese social structure during the epoch time of the Acehnese sultanate. During Dutch colonisation, which began in the late 1800s, Aceh was a centre of resistance against the Dutch colonial rule (Abdul-Ghani, Hussin and Azizah 2015; Bakker 1993; Reid 1979; Teeuwen and Doorn 2006). The Acehnese resisted Dutch forces with open fighting and guerrilla warfare. According to Bakker (1993: 9), the Aceh War (1873–1893) had three phases. The first phase included "the first Aceh expedition of 1873, the second of 1873–1874 and the 'Concentrated Line' of 1883–1893". The second phase was from 1894 to 1903 and the last was from 1904 to 1913.

Nevertheless, the Dutch were concerned about Acehnese cultural heritage and documented it in their cultural anthropological works. The most permanent works on Acehnese culture and arts are by Snouck Hougronje and Kreemer. Yet, there are relatively few historical studies in the area of Acehnese ornamentation during the colonial era. Hourgronje's information on Rumoh Aceh can be seen as the earliest work. Hurgronje (1906: 63) described the nature of Acehnese building and carving:

With the above exceptions the buildings of the Acehnese are, as we have seen, all of wood and the only difference between the houses of great and small consists in their size, the character of the wood used and the carving on the beams and walls. The art of silk-weaving continues to flourish as much

as ever and no little taste is displayed in many of the patterns worked in silk of various colours or shot with gold thread, for loin-cloths (*ija pinggang*) and kerchiefs (*ija sawd*) and materials for trousers (*luetic* or *silueu'e*).

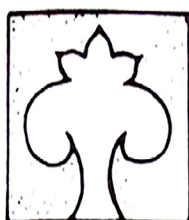
Hurgronje, Kreemer's work (1922) on Acehnese arts and cultures might be seen as another well-documented source in the colonial era. In year 1922, Kreemer published his major historic survey of Acehnese cultures and arts. Acehnese ornaments were adopted and developed from local resources and Islamic cultural markers, such as local flowers, local leaves and calligraphy.

Kreemer demonstrates that the basic motifs of Acehnese ornaments are local flowery shapes and forms as shown in Figure 2.

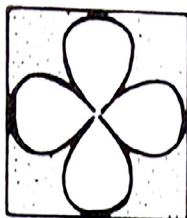
Based on the analysis of every motif of Acehnese ornamentation, Kreemer writes that Acehnese motifs, forms and shapes of visual arts, have a distinctive leafy design. Firstly, the majority of the forms are developed from leafy motifs. Interestingly, all of the motifs are named as *bungoeng* (Acehnese language) which literally means flower in English. The naming is motivated by a response to the hadith prohibition of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism as mentioned earlier. Secondly, the leafy motifs, shapes and forms, are all from the Acehnese origins. Measuring the floral ornaments as shown in Figures 1 and 2, those flowery and leafy motifs indicate that the Acehnese have developed their arts based on local contexts, which are consistent with *salafi* principles/code on arts as noted by al-Faruqi (1986).

In addition to the three phases mentioned earlier, Reid adds a further fourth phase from year 1913 to 1942. Although year 1913 was believed to be the year the Dutch fully conquered the Acehnese (Bakker 1993; Teeuwen and Doorn 2006), Reid argues that Acehnese resistance still occurred. In this phase, the fight against the Dutch was fully taken over by the ulama (Reid 2005; 2009; 2010). This period had two significant events, which greatly influenced the later periods in Acehnese history, including artworks. The first event was the use of cultural resources for propaganda against the Dutch and the second event was the beginning of Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh (PUSA) (Aceh-Wide Ulama Association) development. Surprisingly, the Acehnese ulama used cultural and religious resources, such as *hikayat* and other Acehnese arts for raising heroic spirit of Acehnese against the Dutch.





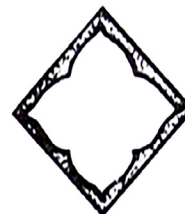
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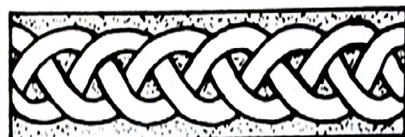
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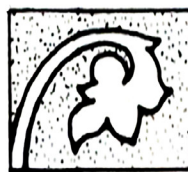
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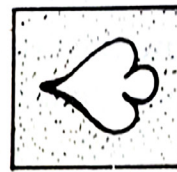
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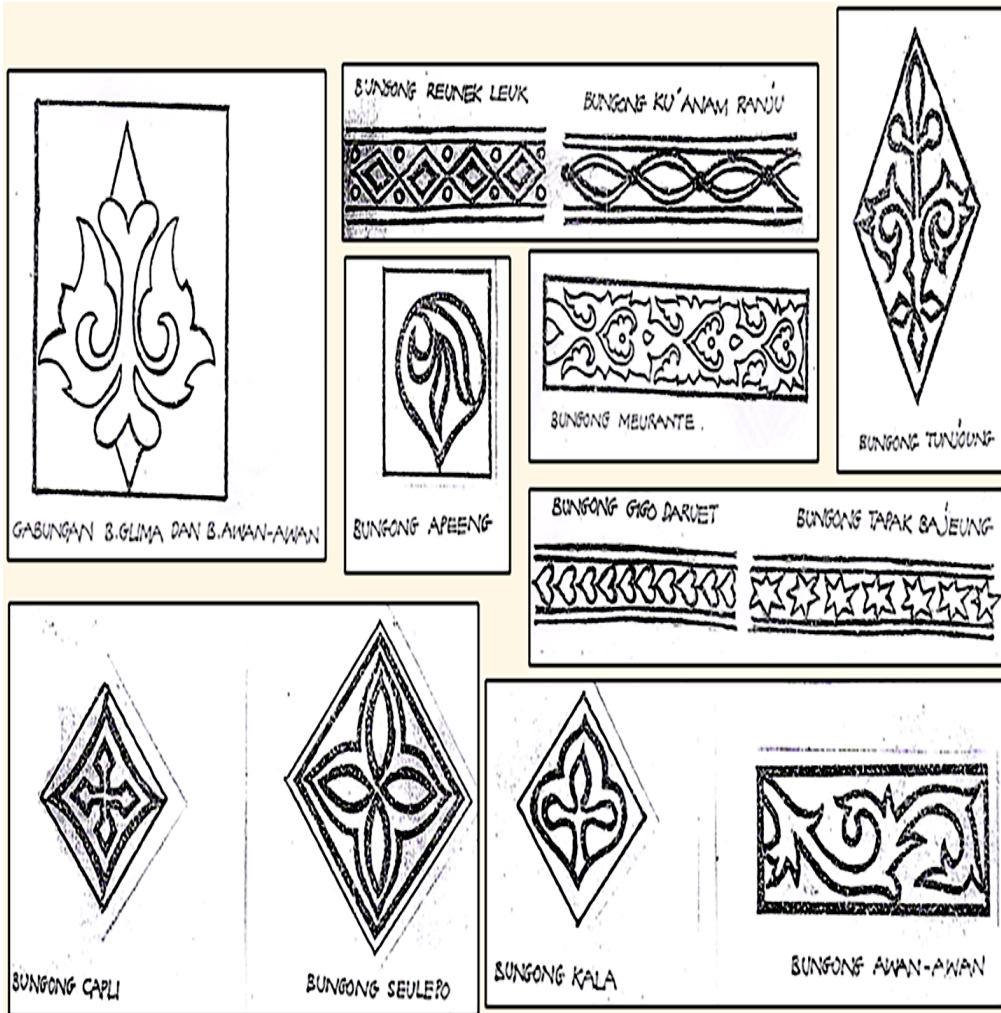
Boengong awan si tangke



Boengong aneu abie

**Figure 2** The figure indicates the basic artistic forms and shapes, which are developed from local flowers and leaves, cited from Kreemer in Yatim (1988: 91).





**Figure 3** The pictures show basic forms of Acehese motifs, which were developed from local leaves and flowers, such as *awan-awan* flower, *glima* flower, *tanjong* flower, cited from Kreemer in Yatim (1988: 91).

Following that, a horizontal conflict occurred regarding the issue of competing interpretations and teachings of Islamic culture. At that time, Dayah and the traditional ulama were challenged by the Islamic reformists or PUSA, who were enlightened by modern Islamic thought, such as those by Muhammad Abduh, Afghani and other figures of PAN-Islam (Formichi 2010; Keddie 1969; Latif 1992; Siegel 1969). The PUSA believes that traditional teachings of Islam, advocated by the Dayah Ulama are heresy, such as *Peusijuek*,<sup>5</sup> *Seuneujoh*, *Meuled*, including figurative images. During Daud Beureueh's and Ali Hasjmy's administration as Aceh governors, the Islamic reformists were becoming stronger because of the government's support. The governors, along with Ulama's Consultancy Assembly (MPU) issued a regulation that prohibited the practice of traditional rituals especially those that used living images (El-Ibrahmy 1982; Siegel 1969).

Even though the reformists were in power at that time, many traditional Muslims like the Dayah community,<sup>6</sup> strongly opposed the reformist ideology. The Dayah community were against the regulations that inhibited the practices of traditional Islamic rituals. The traditionalists used cultures and arts as the instruments to fight against the reformists. They believed that the reformists did not have the right to prohibit the rituals since those practices are a part of Islamic teaching. Therefore, the reformists were seen as misguided and as infidels. As noted by Ricci (2011), many Arabic texts had been interpreted in different ways in Southeast Asia. As such, differences of interpretation had motivated many cultural conflicts. Although the reformists had political power, they had difficulty facing the traditionalist opposition for two reasons. Firstly, the Dayah community was supported by the majority of Acehnese. Secondly, those rituals suspected of heresy, were the markers of Acehnese cultural identity (Aceh Institute 2008; Duhri 2008; 2009).

In addition to the scholars mentioned earlier, Margaret Kartomi and Barbara Leigh pay great attention to Acehnese arts in modern time. In her study on Acehnese dances, Kartomi (2010) argues that Acehnese dances were influenced mainly by the Sufi worldview, in particular the teaching of Ibn Arabi's:

I argue that the origin and development of the sitting (*duek*) song-dances (performed in the prostrated sitting position of Muslim prayer) and the frame-drum genres were motivated by *dakwah* and fostered by the *tarèkat* (Sufi brotherhoods) and the Sufi movement generally. (p. 84)

In the same vein, Leigh establishes a similar argument pertaining to Acehese visual arts. She says that Acehese motifs can be classified into five dominant categories: (1) floral and leafy motifs, (2) birds: peacock, (3) animal motifs: lion, (4) an abundance of geometric motifs and (5) Islamic motifs, e.g., crescent, star and Arabic calligraphy (Leigh 1982: 7). Leigh explains that Persian and Indian arts had dominant impact on the Aceh visual arts (Leigh 1982; 1989; 2013). Illustrating this impact, she decodes bird symbols used in Acehese wedding clothes to show how the Acehese wedding tradition has the connection to the Persian Sufist worldview. The Simurgh is the bird that is described by the Persian Farid ud-Din Attar in *The Conference of Birds*.

Leigh recognises Shi'ite elements as Acehese artistic expressions. However, those expressions had been cleansed due to the influences of the Salafism during PUSA (Leigh 2013: 31). The negative influences of PUSA/Wahabism on traditionalism/sufi arts development is also confirmed by Kartomi and several local artists and art educators.<sup>7</sup> Kartomi (2004: 43–44) also warns us about the presence of Wahabism and their negative impact on Acehese arts:

Acehese ideas of identity are always, of course, in a state of flux as a result of changing social, artistic and cultural experience. Women, men, children, animist mystics, Muslim leaders, former aristocrats, government officials, artists, soldiers and other groups within the community have their own coloring of that sense of identity. However, most seem to agree, for example, that making, playing and listening to musical instruments as well as dancing and other public representational systems serve to articulate the cultural memory and sense of identity; only few-if any-religious leaders subscribe to Wahabi bans on musical instruments and dance.

As explained earlier, the Wahabis do not appreciate the artistic performances as they believe that those practices do not meet the principles of Islamic arts. Therefore, they are forbidden in accordance with the traditions of the prophet (mentioned in the next chapter of this article). Although there are relatively few historical studies in the area of Acehese arts (Hurgronje 1906; Kreemer 1922; Smith 1997; Yatim 1988), literature on the Acehese brings us two interesting and noticeable conclusions. Firstly, as the mainstream claim, Acehese arts are developed and based on Sufi teaching, upon which *wujudiah* has dominant influence.

Secondly, there is hardly any or no Salafi influence on Acehese arts; therefore Salafi teachings have no root or origin in Acehese religiosity. This article is, otherwise, aimed at showing the Salafist influence on Acehese arts and how this influence links to the religiosity of Acehese. Based on the two categories of Acehese arts, I will review different conceptions of Islamic arts and how the religiosity affects the perceptions of Islamic arts.

### THE NATURE OF RUMOH ACEH BEFORE AND DURING COLONIAL ERA

Based on the field observation, the nature of earlier Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation adopts a salafist/orthodox view of arts, which avoids animal and human motifs and employs leafy and flowery motifs, geometric, calligraphic and arabesque motifs. The motifs are similar to the ornamentation of earlier gravestones of the Lamreh and Samudra Pasee Sultanates (Duhri et al. 2016: 81–143).

Grabar (1973: 195–205) explains that those motifs; leafy and flowery, geometric, arabesque and Arabic calligraphic motifs are the characters of earlier Islamic motifs and belong to orthodox Islam. In line with Grabar's view, ornamentation of Tgk Chiek Awe Geutah Rumoh Aceh, Cut Mutia's Rumoh Aceh and Museum Aceh are of the orthodox nature.<sup>8</sup> The ornamentation of Rumoh Aceh Tgk Chiek Awe Geutah (shown in Figures 4–6) illustrates that the house is an example of the pre-colonial era. This is the earliest and the oldest Rumoh Aceh that still exists in present time.

The *rumoh* is highly decorated and full of floral and leafy motifs. Based on my observation, I did not find any animal and human image used for its ornamentation. The ornaments of the house remarkably exemplify the earliest ornamentation of Islam.



**Figure 4** Several motifs of earlier Aceh are floral ornamentation. These flowery motifs were taken from CISAH collection of Lamreh visual arts. For detailed information, please refer to <https://www.facebook.com/cisah.aceh/photos/a.165094723529077.28778.163877823650767/429179487120598/?type=3&theatre>.





**Figure 5** Tgk Chiek Awe Guetah's Rumoh Aceh is the most famous and has the richest ornamentation of all the Rumoh Aceh in present time. The house is believed to be built in the early 18th century.



**Figure 6** Some examples of Rumoh Aceh ornaments showing floral and geometric motifs.

As shown above, vegetal/floral, geometric and arabesque shapes are the notable motifs used in the Rumoh Aceh Tgk Chiek Awe Geutah's ornamentation. The figures above demonstrate local flowers, Bungoeng Paku, fully open lotus flowers and spider net. Leigh (1982) explains that the lotus flower is a non-indigenous motif, which is mostly linked to Hinduism. Yatim (1988: 82) and Al-Attas have earlier encountered the lotus motif in the grave stones of Samudera Pasai. They view that the lotus motif in Acehnese culture has been adapted to Islamic belief and the motif has been Islamised due to the acceptance of the orthodox teaching of the arts. In additions, Arabic calligraphy is also used as the token of an Islamic motif as shown in Figure 7.





**Figure 7** Arabic Calligraphy is a motif carved in the middle of the wall of Tgk Chiek Awe Geutah Rumoh Aceh.

There is little knowledge about Tgk Chiek Awe Geutah. Several local scholars assume that Tgk Chiek Awe Geutah was one of the Acehnese ulama who were of Egyptian origin. He lived during the 18th century (Taqiuddin 2016). Other scholars view that he was of Iraq origin and lived during the reign of Iskandar Muda period (17 CE). By using the material analysis of his Rumoh Aceh's wood, I am more convinced of Taqiuddin's view about the time of his life and the origin of Tgk Chiek Awe Geutah.





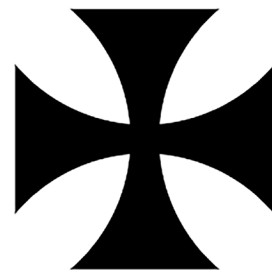
**Figure 8** The motifs of Cut Mutia Rumoh Aceh; different patterns and shapes of floral ornaments.

Cut Meutia's Rumoh Aceh (Figure 8) is another example of Salafist ornamentation in the Acehnese traditional house. Its ornamentation is only crafted by non-representational arts, which is consistent with Salafist view of arts.

There is a disagreement about the role of the Dutch in shaping and developing Acehnese ornamentation during the colonial era. Leigh argues that the Europeans had no influence on Acehnese visual arts since the Acehnese considered them as infidel and colonisers:

The Dutch colonizers and other European traders were regarded in Aceh as infidels. Where their power touched Aceh it was commercial, not cultural and their design motifs have not been copied by the Acehnese. (Leigh 1982: 5)

However, several interviewees stated that the Dutch had an influence on Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation as evidenced in the Rumoh Aceh of Raja Husein shown in Figure 9:



**Figure 9** The two pictures are Rumoh Aceh of Raja Husein in Sigli-Pidie and the petite-cross.

As seen above, the house is interestingly decorated by the petite-cross that is positioned on top of all the other symbols and motifs; Allah, Muhammad, his name and his territory. I believe that this ornamentation was intended to show his submission to the Dutch authority. He was one of the Ulee Balang who cooperated with the colonial agencies and was awarded a great area of land for planting sugar cane, local airport and a small town of Cot Girek for his dedication to support the Dutch agenda in Aceh.

Although it was not significant, Nurdin and Syed Rabadian similarly suggest that the Dutch had an impact on Acehnesse ornamentation. This is supported by my finding during my study that the Dutch had played several roles regarding the Rumoh Aceh and Acehnesse ornamentation. The Dutch documented the Rumoh Aceh below as an Acehnesse cultural marker (as seen in Figure 10).



**Figure 10** A painting of Rumoh Aceh by Teungku Teungoh, documented by Volkenkunde Museum, Amsterdam.

Source: Bayu Djohan (2015).





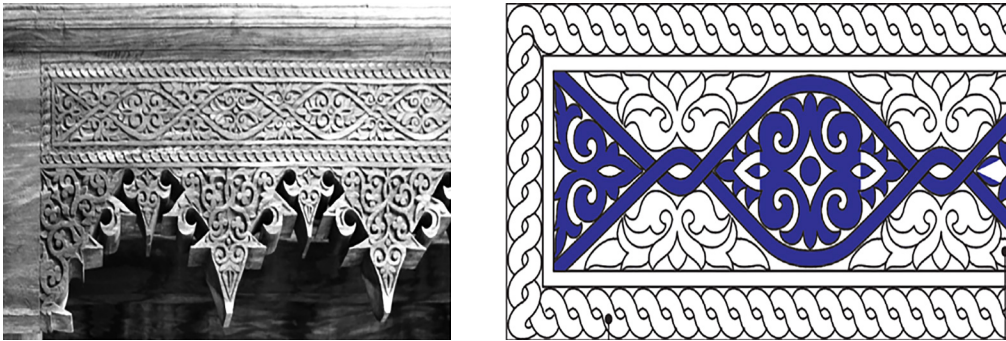
**Figure 11** Museum Aceh and ornamentation.

In addition, the Dutch did not conduct many modifications for preservation. For instance, they painted a Rumoh Aceh that originally had no painting. The Dutch had painted the Rumoh Aceh that was used for the national exhibition of Acehnese heritage in Jakarta. Now, the Rumoh has been used as the Acehnese Museum in Banda Aceh (see Figure 11).

Cut Mutia Rumoh Aceh also had some renovations in order to meet the expectations of the local government; that made it fairly different from the common Rumoh Aceh, but its ornamentation is still similar. Examining the shapes and forms in detail, those flowery shapes and forms resemble those found in Kreemer and Yatim's works (1988) on *Batu Aceh*; they are essentially identical to the salafist perspective on arts, which are basically the instrument for expressing Salafist ideology. Arguing the nature of gravestone motifs, Yatim (1988: 99) establishes:

So, in conclusion, it can be said that the *Batu Aceh* used in Peninsular Malaysia show religious artistic symbolism which, only directly, can be associated with orthodox Islamic beliefs.

In short, the patterns, styles and motifs of ornamentation used for decorating the Rumoh Aceh prior to the colonial era are basically similar to those of mosques and the Acehnese gravestones. In agreement with Yatim, those motifs are the embodiment of Salafist religiosity, the earliest and the basic ornamentation of the Acehnese.



**Figure 12** Examples of floral motifs of the Rumoh Aceh (personal artworks of Syed Rabadian).  
Source: Dora Asra (2015).

### Rumoh Aceh in the 20th Century

The most traceable work on Rumoh Aceh in the post-colonial era was undertaken by Greg Dall (1982). However, his study did not emphasise the ornaments and motifs of Rumoh Aceh as an artistic expression; his attention was more on the cultural meanings, structures and ritual performances at the Rumoh Aceh. As an attempt to fill the gaps of Hurgronje's information on the Acehese traditional house, he described the relationship of the Rumoh Aceh structure to Acehese customs, family life and society. Explaining the individual sections of the Rumoh Aceh, Dall argues that the structure of Rumoh Aceh and the ornamentation are greatly influenced by religious teachings such as Hindu and Islam; examples include the setting of the east-west orientation and the practice of feet washing before entering (Dall 1982: 35, 37). Commenting on the ornamentation of the Rumoh Aceh, he, however, notes the influences of the Salafist theology on the Rumoh Aceh's decoration:

The carving on the main timber members, predominantly in the male verandah areas, are generally geometrie or floral in nature. This is due to the proscriptions of orthodox Islam which prohibit the depiction of humans or animals in religious art (Seobadio 1974: 108). However carvings of monkey figures, snakes, birds and Kala heads (monstrous animal heads of Hindu-Buddhist iconography) are still to be found in many traditional homes. Floral patterns are dominated by the lotus flower in its many different forms. Occasionally influences from animism, Hinduism and Islam can be found existing side by side with carved and fretted timber panels depicting verses from the Koran (Dall 1982: 52).

In agreement with Dall (1982), there is a new development of Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation in the post-colonial era. In contrast to the previous time, the ornamentation of the Rumoh Aceh in the 20th century had significant changes. The following pictures show that there were many animal motifs used in the Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation during this time. I found pigeons (see Figures 15, 17 and 18), peacocks (see Figures 13 and 14), *buraqs* (see Figure 16), ducks (see Figure 19) and *tapak enter*<sup>9</sup> in addition to the earlier ornamentation. These images of animals illustrate the evidence of the shift and new development in Acehese ornamentation of Rumoh Aceh in the 20th century. This shift, therefore, indicates a new expression of Acehese religiosity, which is traditional in nature and character as explained earlier.



**Figure 13** One of the Rumoh Aceh built in post-colonial time at Peudada, Bireun.

The Figures 13 and 14 of Rumoh Aceh in Peudada show the motifs of pigeons at the top. Leigh (1982) identifies that there are many various bird images used as motifs in Aceh, such as parrot, peacock, phoenix, dove and garuda.<sup>10</sup> She argues that the use of bird motifs in Islam signifies the soul of the spirit, which is of Hindu origin, representing the "upper celestial ethereal world" (Leigh 1982: 8).





**Figure 14** The images of peacock motifs and Arabic calligraphy are carved in the ceiling section.



**Figure 15** Forms of pigeons used for the motifs of the Rumoh Aceh (personal artworks of Syed Rabadian).





**Figure 16** This Rumoh Aceh built in the post-colonial era vividly demonstrates animal images. The photo was taken at Seulantei, Meulaboh by author.

Accordingly, al-Faruqi (1986) commented on the "symbolic nature of Islamic arts" and the representational arts/living images as non-Islamic arts, which are either influenced by western worldview (pp. 175–179), animistic beliefs/"pre-Islamic artistic culture of the area" (p. 584), or Zoroastrian teachings in Iran or pre-Islamic art of Pesia (p. 398). In the same vein, Grabar also confirms al-Faruqi's point of view, Grabar argues in *From the Icon to Aniconism: Islam and the Image* that Islamic art is non-naturalistic or iconistic as it is common among Christian beliefs and practices (Grabar 2003).



**Figure 17** Pigeon and lotus motifs are shown in Andian's Rumoh Aceh at Rambayan, Pidie. This photo is from the author's personal collection.

Contrary to the Salafi view, traditionalist ulama accept representational arts that are justified by the hidden interpretations of the holy texts regarding animal images mentioned earlier. This esoteric approach to the holy texts allows living images as decoration (Kalabadzi 1980; Michon 2008). Regarding the holy text forbidding animal images, Ottoman Yatim notes:

As is common among all Islamic art, where the human form is forbidden for religious reasons, the use of designs such as floral or vegetal, "webs" or "nets", geometrie, *mihrab* (niche) and "vase" shapes prevail (Figure 5).

The prohibition of using human form in art is justified by the acceptance by orthodox Muslims of the belief that "on the Day of Judgement when the painter (any artist) stands before the Throne of God he will be commanded to put life into the works of art he has created and when he confesses his inability to do so, he will be forthwith cast down into Hell" (Arnold 1932: 2). However, Bamborough (1976: 25) was of the opinion that the artistic tradition and development of Islamic art has more to do with the absence of pictorial forms ... than Koranic law. (p. 82)



**Figure 18** Other floral and pigeon motifs of Rumoh Aceh. This photo is from the author's personal collection.





**Figure 19** Duck and lotus motifs in Sairah's Rumoh Aceh, at Rambayan-Pidie. This photo is from the author's personal collection.

Sairah's Rumoh Aceh was built during the era from the 1930s to the 1970s. The use of animal images as its ornamentation indicates the shift of Acehnese religiosity, which contravenes the principles of Salafi arts as proposed by al-Faruqi. An analysis of the shift of the 20th century features of the Rumoh Aceh ornamentation indicates that the traditionalist view has dominated the artwork in Aceh. This is likely due to the decline of PUSA's influence on the Acehnese religiosity. Conversely, before the 20th century, Rumoh Aceh's ornamentation was greatly influenced by the view of Salafi teaching.

## **CONCLUSION**

Rumoh Aceh represents a micro level of Acehnese cosmology. It illustrates the development of Acehnese religiosity, as indicated in its ornamentation. The motifs, shapes and patterns used for its decoration vividly describe the shift of Acehnese religiosity. It shows that Acehnese piety and religiosity are continuously changing and adapting to fit local culture and retain its Islamic nature. In the first phase, orthodox Islam dominated Acehnese religiosity; however, as the power of PUSA declined, traditional Islam took over Islamic universality and overshadowed locality. Religiosity is therefore an on-going process of Islamisation and reformation. The dialectical relationship between locality, by which traditionalist stands and divinity advocated by the orthodox Islam, indicates the process of being and becoming. The evidence for this flux and reflux is based on the shift and the development of the Rumoh Aceh ornamentation. During the pre-colonial era, orthodox Islam influenced Acehnese visual art, while in the 20th century, traditionalist Islam had taken over the influence on the ornamentation.

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## NOTES

1. The debate about the meaning of the concept of "Islamic" in Islamic art is identical to that about "Islamic" in Islamic philosophy. Syech Abdurraziek in his seminal publication advocates the meaning of the term "Islamic" that is inspired and based on the Quran, such as *Ushul fiqh* and *Ilm Kalam*. In contrast, the opponents view that the term only refers to the geographical area and civilisation of Muslims. For details, see Syech Abdurraziek *Tamhied li Tariekh al-Falsafatu al-Islamiyah, Daarul Kitab al-Misrie*, 2010.
2. Oleg Grabar is one of the leading scholars in the field of Islamic arts. He has many publications on Islamic arts. I am surprised by his definition of Islamic arts mentioned above. In his article entitled *From the Icon to Aniconism: Islam and the Image*, his definition of the term has changed. In the article, he advocates the Salafist view on arts when he compares the Islamic and Christian arts.
3. There are many different *hadiths* concerning the living images in Islam. Here are some examples: According to The Hadith of Ayisha (Radiya Allahu Anha) that has been reported in Sahih al-Bukhari, the Prophet (*Sallallahu Alaihi wa Sallam*) said, "Whoever makes a picture will be punished by Allah till he puts life in it, and he will never be able to put life in it". Another hadith reads "The most severe punishment will be to those who try to create something like the creation of Allah". The Prophet (*Sallallahu Alaihi wa Sallam*) said, "Angels do not enter into a house in which there is a picture". Another hadith is with the words "When a pious person amongst them (among the religious groups) dies they build a place of worship on his grave, and then decorate it with such pictures. They would be the worst of creatures on the Day of Judgment in the sight of Allah".
4. There are three levels of Acehnese cosmology: micro level – the structure of housing, meso level – the structure of a city/town and surroundings and finally macro level – the structure of Acehnese society.
5. *Peusijuek* is a traditional ritual performed for the purposes of healing and well-being. This ritual uses some ingredients, such as fresh leaves, rice and paddy and water. Also, the performer cast spells for blessing persons in the ritual.
6. *Dayah* had been introduced since the beginning of Acehnese cultural emergence in Southeast Asia. When travellers or da'i from Arab, Gujarat, and India came to Aceh, they established an Islamic education institution, later called *Dayah*, in order to Islamise the region and to maintain the implementation of Islamic teachings. Although there is little hard evidence, the Acehnese believe

that Islamic traditional education in the Southeast Asia region started in Aceh. It began in the 10th century and reached its peak of development in the 16th century. This was believed to be the golden age of Islamic education. For example, it is believed that Dayah Baiturrahman was a university with 17 faculties. Dayah Cot Kala was the first centre of Islamic higher education in Southeast Asia. It made a massive contribution to the spread of Islam throughout the archipelago. It produced many scholars, which became *da'i* in the regions. Although education was conducted merely by sitting in a semi-circle around the teacher, this *Dayah* laid an important foundation in Acehnese history because the alumni of the *Dayah* would go on to establish their own *Dayah* in another area, where Islam was not yet the dominant religion. This process is central to the Islamisation of the Acehnese community (Dhuhri 2014).

7. To confirm the view, I interviewed art teachers of secondary school in Lhokseumawe and several practitioners of visual arts in North Aceh and Banda Aceh, and I found that PUSA authorities and local MPU had a strict control on art performances and visual arts. They regard that many Acehnese artworks are against Islamic teaching, such as Rapa'i, Seudati and visual artworks.
8. I observed the houses and took photos of various motifs for the data of this article. To understand the images, I consulted many local artists and art historians, like Said Dahlan, Pak Nurdin, Pak Yunus and Ibu Misbah.
9. *Tapak Entei* is an Acehnese word derived from Japanese origin. *Entei* means the demon that possesses tremendous power in form of the sun. *Tapak* means a trace (like circular shape) left on one's body signed for the death of his beloved relative.
10. Garuda is Indonesian word, meaning the mighty eagle who is the most powerful of all birds, similar to Simurg in accordance with Fariduddin Al-Attar's description.

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