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HOLY WAR AND THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER[1]

Rethinking Acehnese *perang sabil* in the late 19th century

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have traditionally characterised *perang sabil,* the Malay term for waging holy war in the way of Allah, as the predominant feature of the Aceh War in the late 19th century. In this sense, *perang sabil* was often understood as a natural response of Acehnese Muslims toward the Dutch (*kafir*) invasion of Aceh. This perspective emphasised the existence of rigid borders and centuries of rivalry between the Muslim world and Christendom. It tends to locate the Sultanate of Aceh as an outsider of the broader international society. Recent scholarship, however, has challenged such depictions. Scholars maintain that Muslim empires or sultanates historically integrated into and contributed to international society, effectively dismantling the binary notion of Muslim versus Christian. Ibrahim Alfian, an Acehnese scholar, has suggested that the Acehnese ulama formally declared *perang sabil* after 1877, four years after the Dutch first invasion, and it gained popularity in the 1880s. This raises the question: If *perang sabil* is considered a natural Muslim response to a Christian (*kafir*) empire, why did it not occur from the outset of the Aceh War? This article posits that Acehnese *perang sabil* was a reaction to the evolving stratification of the international society in the late 19th century, the persistent racialisation of Muslims, and the Dutch colonial genocide during the Aceh War.

KEYWORDS

Aceh War; international society; Muslim; *perang sabil*; racialisation

ABSTRAK

Para peneliti, pada umumnya, sepakat bahwa perang sabil, istilah Melayu untuk perang suci di jalan Allah, sebagai ciri utama Perang Aceh pada akhir abad ke-19. Dalam konteks ini, perang sabil sering dipahami sebagai respons alami Muslim Aceh sebagai bentuk perlawanan terhadap kafir Belanda di Aceh. Perspektif ini biasanya menekankan adanya batas-batas imajiner tegas dan konflik berabad-abad antara dunia Muslim dan Kristen, sehingga cenderung menempatkan Kesultanan Aceh sebagai pihak luar dalam masyarakat internasional. Namun, penelitian-penelitian terbaru telah menantang gambaran tersebut. Para peneliti tersebut berpendapat bahwa kesultanan atau imperium Muslim secara historis adalah anggota integral dan aktif dari masyarakat

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internasional dan itu secara efektif membongkar gagasan biner pertentangan antara Muslim dan Kristen. Menurut Ibrahim Alfian, seorang sejarawan Aceh, ulama Aceh baru secara resmi mendeklarasikan perang sabil setelah tahun 1877, empat tahun setelah invasi pertama Belanda dan kemudian baru populer pada 1880-an. Hal ini menimbulkan pertanyaan: Jika perang sabil dianggap sebagai respons alami Muslim terhadap imperium Kristen (kafir), mengapa fatwa perang sabil tidak terjadi sejak awal Perang Aceh? Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa perang sabil Aceh adalah reaksi terhadap stratifikasi masyarakat internasional yang berkembang pada akhir abad ke-19, rasialisasi yang terus-menerus terhadap Muslim, dan genosida kolonial Belanda selama Perang Aceh.

KATA KUNCI

Perang Aceh; masyarakat internasional; Muslim; *perang sabil*; rasialisasi

Introduction

Jihad or holy war (Malay: *perang sabil*)[2] has become a buzzword associated with Muslims' perceived inclination towards violence against the non-Muslim 'infidels'. Scholars tend to approach the concept of jihad through an essentialist lens. Indonesianists have treated holy war or *perang sabil* in Aceh as an unchanging concept. [3] From their perspective, holy war represents an inherited and immutable doctrine of Islam firmly inscribed in the Qur'an. For sultans of Pasai, *perang sabil* was a holy war 'against his infidel neighbours in the fifteenth century' (Alfian 2006: 110). For the sultans of Aceh, it was against the Portuguese and Dutch in the 16th and 19th centuries, respectively. Their *perang sabil* from the 13th to the 19th century against the

[2] *Perang sabil* is a hybrid Malay phrase for war and the Arabic phrase *jihad fi sabililah*. It is roughly translated as 'war in Allah's path' or 'holy war'. I use *perang sabil* as a specific reference to the Acehnese holy war and use jihad for broader use. *Perang sabil* has various pronunciations and spellings. In Aceh, the variations include *prang sabil*, *prang sabi*, and *perang sabil*; in Mindanao, it would be *paarang sabil*.

[3] Parallels can be drawn with Bernard Lewis' comment on Usama bin Ladin's statement in 1998, where Lewis argues that for centuries, all ulama have unanimously agreed that jihad is a personal duty for every Muslim whenever enemies attack the Muslim lands. He has emphasised that 'the obligation of holy war therefore begins at home and continues abroad, against the same infidel enemy' (Lewis 2004).

non-Muslim power, the Indonesianists argue, aimed to expand or defend the Islamic lands, beliefs and social order in the Malay-Indonesia archipelago (Alfian 2006: 111–113; Hadi 2010: chps 1 and 7; 2011).

One of the most notable works on the Aceh War is by Anthony Reid (1969b) where he traces the origin of the Aceh War back to the early 19th-century contest among the Western empires for colonies in Southeast Asia – mainly Britain and the Netherlands and involving other powers such as the United States,[4] Italy, and France. Reid's contributions have been instrumental in laying the foundation for future scholars to understand Acehnese Muslim responses to the onset of European colonialism. This article, in that sense, also follows Reid's logical explanation. However, Reid (1969b: 108) asserts that in anticipating the second Dutch invasion of Aceh in November 1873, 'many of the ulama were already preaching a jihad, a duty and a privilege for every Muslim'. Notably, he does not provide specific evidence to support this claim. Subsequent scholars on the Aceh War also seem to follow Reid's arguments. Azyumardi Azra (2004: 141) and William Roff (1977: 155–181), for example, agree that the Aceh War already acquired its religious tones, especially jihad, from its initial phase. Thus, the scholarship, explicitly or implicitly, posits the Acehnese *perang sabil* as a Muslim's natural response towards the invasion of European empires such as the Netherlands.

What is more intriguing is Alfian's argument. He frames the Acehnese struggle against the invasion of Dutch troops from a religious lens but also recognises that 'there is no evidence during the early years of the war against the Dutch that religious

[4] Reid (1968b: 14-15) suggests that while the US did not seek colonies in Southeast Asia, it had economic interest in Aceh since the early 19th century. For more recent analysis on the American ventures in Southeast Asia, see Farish A. Noor (2018).

leaders or ulama played a prominent role in the efforts against the enemy' (Alfian 1987: 21). The earliest evidence he provides depicting the war with Islamic notion occurred on 18 April 1874, several months after the second Dutch invasion. Here, the word *perang sabil* had yet to appear. It took almost another four years, in December 1877, for an Acehnese ulama to explicitly declare *perang sabil* (Alfian 1987: 107). Even then, *perang sabil* only gradually gained its popularity after the 1880s, at least a decade after the first Dutch invasion of Aceh. During the period, the Acehnese ulama, such as Teungku Chik Kutakarang (d.1895) and Chik di Tiro (d.1891), wrote and propagated *hikayat perang sabil* and mobilised other Acehnese to join them.

Thus, essentialising Acehnese *perang sabil* from the 13th century onwards and depicting it as a Muslim natural response against foreign (non-Muslim) power has several limitations. Firstly, they assume homogeneity and linearity of Muslim thoughts and actions throughout different times and all walks of life. It overlooks the complex and multifaceted identities and centuries of Muslim relations with the various Western powers. Every Muslim, in this line of argument, would have a unanimous reaction and understanding regarding their alleged duty of jihad or *perang sabil*. Moreover, deviations from such unanimity would be considered exceptions or categorised as 'bad' or 'good' Muslim, a binary category Mahmood Mamdani (2005) exposed as a fallacy.

Numerous scholars in the last two decades have endeavoured to deconstruct such Muslim homogeneity and linearity (e.g. Motadel 2012; Aydin 2017). During the Aceh War, Muslims, both on the battlefield and abroad, had diverse reactions vis-à-vis *perang sabil*. Three Arabic letters explicating the Acehnese *perang sabil* in the late 19th century illustrate the complexity of the ulamas' struggle to issue a simple, homogenous and straightforward jihad *fatwa* (van Koningsveld 1990). Hasan Mustafa,

a Muslim working for the Dutch colonial government as chief *penghulu*[5] in Aceh, declared a *fatwa* stating that Acehnese Muslims should accept Dutch rule and remain loyal, as the Dutch intended to 'civilise' or 'uplift' the Acehnese Muslims (Ali 2017; Rohmana 2018, 2020). Snouck Hurgronje (2007: 262) recorded a debate between two Muslims in Mecca where a Javanese Muslim argued that 'Europeans must govern us; that is God's will. Why drive out the Dutch … finally to get … English masters?'. These studies reveal a more nuanced view of Acehnese response towards Dutch colonial rule and invasions.

Secondly, the notions enforce a strict divide between norm-generating universalisms, separating Muslim and non-Muslim communities while concealing their interactions. In this respect, the depiction portrays the Muslim holy war as the antithesis of European civilisation, which conceives itself as universal due to the transcendence of its Christian roots. The notion, therefore, perceives the Acehnese call for holy war against the Dutch invasion in the late 19th century as part of an ongoing clash between the Muslim world and Christendom, and a nativist response to Western encroachment. This view suggests that the practice and meaning of jihad are immutable, transhistorical, and monolithic, reinforcing divisions between Muslims and non-Muslims and between Islam and the West.

Recent historians and religious studies scholars argue that the association of Muslims, Islam, and jihad with threat and violence resulted from the ongoing Euro-American colonisation, racialisation, and minoritisation of Muslims since the mid 19th century (Jalal 2010; Fuerst 2019). Moreover, jihad did not necessarily derive from any incontestable Qur'anic authority and did not automatically aim at fighting non-Muslims or reflect opposition to Western modernity. Instead, within a global context, jihad has

[5] A *penghulu* was a government official responsible for Islam-related matters in the Dutch government.

taken diverse forms, including as a state-making and counter-colonial worldmaking project in many Muslim-majority regions (Malhi 2018). Bruce Lawrence (2000) takes it a step further by juxtaposing and associating the idea of jihad with corporate culture. Joshua Gedacht (2015) also argues that *perang sabil* may function as a liminal idiom to define and redefine what Muslims consider Islamic and modern. Such a dialectic process between jihad and modernity unfolded in Mindanao and Aceh, where *perang sabil* manifested modernity (Gedacht 2015). More recently, Darryl Li (2019) has unpacked jihadism as an 'evil' category, leading us to rethink jihad as a competing universalism comparable to other universalist projects such as the Non-Aligned Movement, United Nations peacekeeping, and the US-led global war on terror. His critical lens helps us understand the complexities of jihad as a phenomenon that transcends traditional boundaries and ideologies, shaping interactions between legal and political systems.

Thirdly, although Anthony Reid's research stands out for its focus on how multiple empires were contesting for Sumatra in the late 19th century, most studies on the Aceh War tend to frame it solely as a bilateral conflict between Aceh and the Netherlands (Said 1981; Alfian 1987; Bakker 1993; Stolwijk 2021). Critical reading of Acehnese letters, reports, and writings on the Dutch-Aceh conflict reveals their frustration with the lack of response from the international community to their appeals, a community they had relied on for decades. Therefore, the Aceh War was not merely a conflict between the Sultanate of Aceh and the Netherlands but involved various 'civilised' powers of the 19th century. More specifically, as I will demonstrate in the following sections, Acehnese's frustrations arose from the lack of response from friendly European powers and the Ottoman empire. Thus, characterising *perang sabil* as merely responding to the European invasion tends to overlook that the Acehnese

also perceived the Ottoman empire as an equal member of the 'civilised' Eurocentric international community.

This article, of course, does not invent a new wheel or deny all previous scholars' contributions. On the contrary, all previous studies on the Aceh War have been instrumental in forming questions to re-evaluate the Acehnese *perang sabil.* What did motivate Acehnese to wage *perang sabil* in the late 19th century? If *perang sabil* was a natural reaction of Muslims to European invasion, why did *perang sabil* only gain popularity a decade after the first Dutch invasion rather than immediately during the first and second Dutch invasions (1873–1874)?

This article does not delve further into the diverse meaning of jihad. Instead, it seeks to historicise the Acehnese *perang sabil* within international politics to understand the precedence leading to the Acehnese ulamas' declaration of a *perang sabil* fatwa in the 1880s. In doing so, it follows the argument and logic Cemil Aydin (2007) that the legitimacy crisis of the Eurocentric world order in the late 19th century produced competing visions of world order. Therefore, the legitimacy crisis of the Eurocentric world order produced Acehnese *perang sabil*.

John A. Hobson (2005) and Hannah Arendt (1973) identified the mid 1880s until 1914 as the era of high imperialism. During the period, an unprecedented moral silence in European public opinion allowed empires to compete aggressively for overseas territories, often resorting to violent means, leading to the scramble for Africa and the subjugation of Asia (Arendt 1973: 123–124; Hobson 2005: 19). In the context of *perang sabil*, the silent period in Europe coincided with the roaring call for Muslim holy war in the Malay-Indonesia world and Africa. Concurrent with the Acehnese holy war against the Dutch troops, the declaration of *perang sabil* also occurred during the

Pahang War (1891–1895) in Pahang and the Mahdi War (1881–1899) in Sudan against the British. A similar declaration of *perang sabil* took place in Mindanao, the Philippines, during the Moro war (1899–1913) against American troops. Given the proximity between the Aceh and Mindanao, Frederic Dale (1988) even suggests that copies of the Acehnese *perang sabil'*s text might have circulated in Mindanao, where the local forces used them to fight Spanish forces. A Dutch officer also found *Sjair Perang Atjeh* (Poem of Aceh War) at Banda, South Moluccas (Blok, 1885). Additionally, compared to earlier wars such as the Java War (1825–1830), the Padri War (1803–1837), or the United States' war on Aceh in 1832, the Aceh War garnered more international responses from the population residing in Aceh's nearby islands or far from the battlefield. Muslims in Java, British Malaya, Mecca, and Istanbul expressed Muslim solidarity and criticised the Dutch invasion as a violation of international law. The Aceh War also sparked public discussion regarding the legitimacy of the Dutch invasion and European prestige in Britain, the Netherlands, France, and the United States (*New York Herald* 1873; Kuitenbrouwer 1991: 103–104; Reid and Reid 2005; Efe et al. 2012; Deliana 2017). These international responses and the declaration of holy war in four separate regions with possible connections at the turn of the 20th century indicate that the Acehnese *perang sabil* was not an isolated event but part of the global tumult of the late 19th century.

Thus, understanding the Acehnese holy war necessitates an analysis of the character of the international order and society. Through re-reading Acehnese diplomatic relations, the locus of this analysis is on tracing the changing character, norms, and perceptions of international society throughout the 19th century concerning the Sultanate of Aceh, compared to the preceding centuries and the early modern period. This article aims, first and foremost, to challenge the common assumption that

jihad is a natural Muslim reaction to the 'infidel' invasion. Secondly, shifting the lens to the contemporary condition of international politics and society departs from the conventional framework of analysing the Aceh War as merely a bilateral conflict between the Sultanate of Aceh and the Netherlands to a multilateral one.

The subsequent sections briefly discuss the Sultanate of Aceh's imperial logic and identities vis-à-vis other imperial powers and international politics before the 19th century. Following that, we will explore the sultanate's positioning during the transformational period of international politics, norms, and society to comprehend what motivated the Acehnese ulama to declare *perang sabil* in the late 19th century.

The Sultanate of Aceh: an integral member of the international society

Scholars have often linked the central role of Islamic law and devout way of life to Acehnese history and society. Islam, from this perspective, was the cornerstone of Acehnese identity and daily existence, making it a natural choice and an ideological foundation for legitimising political decisions and actions (Hasjmy 1993; Hadi 2010). Within the context of Aceh's resistance against Dutch forces, defending Islam against the invasion of non-Muslims *kafir* became a fundamental personal duty for Acehnese individuals. As David Kloos (2018: 5) aptly contends, this perspective has led to the conflation of Islam with violence.

The utilisation of Islam as the primary facet of Acehnese identity and as a motivating force against the Dutch empire typically rests on two key assumptions. Firstly, it presupposes that the Sultanate of Aceh primarily identified as Islamic, leading its sultans to form alliances exclusively within the Muslim world (Hadi 2004). Secondly, it posits an imperceptible yet unyielding border between the Muslim Sultanate of Aceh and the non-Muslim European-Christian empires. According to this narrative, Aceh existed perpetually beyond this boundary, never part of the European-

Christian realm. Thus, the rapid expansion of European empires in the 19th century made conflict inevitable, as Muslims believed European-Christian values inherently opposed their faith. Consequently, *perang sabil* in Aceh against modern European imperialism in the 1870s was seen as an inescapable outcome (Alfian 2006; Hadi 2010).

Nevertheless, such portrayals overlook the multifaceted imperial identity of the Sultanate of Aceh, which, like other empires worldwide, encompasses not just an Islamic identity but a tapestry of identities and political traditions. To create affiliations and a sense of belonging, the Sultan of Aceh drew from various traditions, both within and beyond the Indonesia-Malay world, and extended back to a period before the advent of Islam in 7th-century Arabia. The mosaic of centuries-long interactions between the Sultanate of Aceh and Southeast Asian kingdoms, networks across the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, and European and American powers shaped their identities. Sultans of Aceh often invoked titles and figures from Persianate and pre-Islamic Arab, Greco-Roman, Indic, and Malay traditions and legacies. For instance, parallel with the practice of Ottoman sultans, the Acehnese sultans also added title *shah,* which indicates a solid Persianate influence (see Marcinkowski 2002; Kołodziejczyk 2012). Their practice of sacred kingship, blurring the line between king and God, was a legacy of earlier Hindu court traditions akin to those of Mughal emperors. Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah al-Mukammil (1588–1604) pursued a mystic path under a spiritual master to engage in such practices (Brakel 1979: 58–59; Moin 2012; Balabanlilar 2016). In letters to foreign rulers, Sultan Iskandar Thani (r.1639–1641) and Sultanah Safiatuddin Shah (r.1641–1675) referenced pre-Islamic figures like Nusyirwan ‘Adil, a Persian king, and Hatim Tai, an Arabian poet, who appeared in

texts like *Taj al-Salatin*, *Sejarah Melayu,* and *Bustan al-Salatin* as examples of just non-Muslim kings (al-Bukhari 1992: chp. 8; Gallop 2011: 121–122).

Moreover, Nuruddin al-Raniry, a mufti of the Sultanate of Aceh, portrayed Sultan Perkasa Alam Johan (Sultan Iskandar Muda) as a descendant of Alexander the Great in his 17th-century history book *Bustan al-Salatin* (ar-Raniry 1966; Lombard 1986: 228–229; Ng 2019). The Malay Annals also known as *Sulalat as-Salatin* or *Sejarah Melayu* referred to the Ottoman sultan as the *raja rum* (king of Rome), indicating that Greco-Roman and other pre-Islamic traditions did not contradict their Muslim identity (Iskandar 1959). Thus, Acehnese imperial identities were complex and cosmopolitan, reflecting the diversity and affluence of the sultanate's population and its interactions with regional and international powers.

Depending on the circumstance, sultans of Aceh alternately invoked and synthesised these multiple identities. As a Muslim sultanate in the Indonesia-Malay world, the sultans of Aceh envisioned themselves not only as rulers of their kingdom or dominion but also as great kings of the East on par with the Sultan Rum in the West (Iskandar 1959: 167, section 237–238; Reid 2006). Thus, they recognised that employing hybrid identities and legacies transcending their Muslim identity was crucial to expanding their political, economic, and cultural influences over a diverse array of powers with varying ethnicities and religions in their region and beyond. For instance, Sultan Riayat Shah Al-Kahhar (r.1537–71) invoked his Islamic credentials when seeking military aid from the Ottoman sultans against the Portuguese, humbling himself out of respect (Casale 2005, 2010: chp 3–5). However, Sultan Iskandar Muda (r.1607–36) consciously omitted Islamic legitimacy, opting for an Indic vestige, likely influenced by Syamsuddin al-Sumatra'i (d.1630), the shaikh al-Islam of the Acehnese court (Gallop 2011: 111).

Furthermore, the Sultanate of Aceh was far from isolated; it was an active and integral member of the international society, extending beyond the boundaries of the Muslim world. Sultans of Aceh regularly received and dispatched delegations to various empires within their networks, spanning the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and Europe. For example, in the same year of 1602, Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah al-Mukammil (r.1589–1604) warmly welcomed James Lancaster, an ambassador of the English Queen Elizabeth; as well as sending three delegates to the Netherlands as part of his strategy to re-establish strong relations between Aceh and Prince Maurice of (Orange) Nassau, the governor of several provinces in the Netherlands. Upon arrival, the Acehnese delegates enjoyed lavish receptions, extravagant banquets, and royal visits from European monarchs. Prince Maurice spared no expense, using the visit to strengthen his stance against the Portuguese and counter their disparaging rumours (Mitrasing 2011: 88–89; Taylor 2018; Emmer and Gommans 2020: 378–379). Notably, the Acehnese court also produced key texts comparable to European ones. Bukhari al-Jauhari authored *Taj al-Salatin* (The Crown of Kings) in 1603 in Sumatra, a work comparable to Hugo Grotius's *Mare Liberum*, a foundational text in the field of international law. Both works shared themes of sovereignty, legitimacy, justice, law, social contract, the right of rebellion, and treaties with rulers of different religions. While Grotius' book served as the standard in European international law, Bukhari's *Taj al-Salatin* found wide circulation throughout Southeast Asia and was a fundamental text for rulers in the Malay-Indonesia region until the 19th century (Weststeijn 2017).

These extensive global networks and interactions ultimately engendered imperial hybrid legacies, identities, and ideas that eroded the rigid boundary between the Muslim world and the Christian-European sphere, given the absence of a single and hegemonic world order in the early modern period. Therefore, the Sultanate of Aceh

operated within a fluid and relatively egalitarian international framework. As such, the international powers did not perceive or treat the Sultanate of Aceh solely as a member of the Muslim world network; instead, they saw Aceh as an active and integral participant in the international society since its emergence in the 16th century. Nevertheless, the international standing and recognition of the Sultanate of Aceh gradually waned in the 19th century.

The Sultanate of Aceh in the racial and hierarchical world order

In 1832, President Andrew Jackson of the United States dispatched the frigate *Potomac* to attack Quallah Battoo (Kuala Batu, southwest Aceh), a region under the Sultanate of Aceh, in response to an assault on the American merchant ship *Friendship*. What makes this event intriguing is the ensuing American public criticism within the United States, evoking moral arguments, not religious ones, to question the legitimacy of the American naval ship attacking civilians, women, and children in Quallah Battoo. It is notable that there was neither a proclamation of *perang sabil* nor evocation of global Muslim solidarity, in stark contrast to the Aceh War in the late 19th century (Farish A. Noor 2018: chp. 2). This early 19th-century episode highlights the enduring significance of inter-imperial rationality and identities in the preceding centuries. Racial, civilisational, or religious logic and identity only gradually gained prominence in Aceh during the latter part of the 19th century. However, these factors only added a new dimension to the imperial competition's existing hybrid and cosmopolitan aspects. It was not until the close of the 19th century that racial, civilisational, and religious elements superseded the inter-imperial identities and logic.

Recent scholarship links this shift to a globalised Eurocentric international system in the late 19th century. Eric Weitz (2008) argues that over about a hundred

years, the Vienna System, based on multinational polities, territorial adjustments, and traditional diplomacy, gave way to the Paris System. The Paris System focused on population politics centred around religion, civilisation, race, nationality, and ethnicity. Other scholars highlight the emergence of a Eurocentric standard of 'civilised empire', racialisation based on race and religion, and advances in transportation and communication technologies. These developments challenged imperial logic and identities, shaping global Muslim identity (Adas 2004; Motadel 2012; Gelvin and Green 2014; Aydin 2017). Adom Getachew (2018) asserts that the 19th century marked the rise of racial hierarchy and unequal integration to secure Euro-American domination across Africa. Under such global conditions, this article analyses why Acehnese *perang sabil* emerged only a decade after the first and second Dutch invasions.

Departing from a solely anarchical view of international politics, I adopt a pervasive hierarchical perspective. The anarchical view posits that a weaker state must rely solely on its internal resources to defend against the more powerful states, and rulers cannot share their authority and responsibilities with other rulers (Bull and Watson 1984). Conversely, under a hierarchical approach, states often voluntarily subordinate themselves and share their sovereignty (rights and obligations) with others, such as in a protectorate relationship. A powerful military state, for instance, will provide security in return for exclusive trade from a state with abundant natural resources (Lake 2011: 52–56). The 19th-century Sultanate of Aceh aligned more with the hierarchical model than the anarchical one. The Eurocentric world order viewed the Sultanate of Aceh as an integral member of international society but placed it within a stratified space, treating it as unequal and inferior, thus burdening it with arduous

obligations while affording it only limited or conditional rights (Getachew 2018: 18; see also Keene 2014).

The formation of international law during the 19th century plays a pivotal role in shaping Acehnese perspectives. Antony Anghie (2005) demonstrates that imperial interest and colonial conflict with non-European entities significantly influenced the development of international law throughout this period. European officers, emphasising 'cultural difference', portrayed the cultures of European and non-European states, like the Sultanate of Aceh, as fundamentally distinct. European empires, positioning themselves as 'civilised' leaders, considered themselves the upholders of the standards of civilisation. They deemed their cultures universal and civilised compared to the particular and uncivilised cultures of non-Europeans. These definitions significantly impacted the legal and political statuses within international society, creating a binary perspective that characterised European political relations with non-European states by its inequality. Under these circumstances, European powers wielded the political and legal practices of inclusion and exclusion (Anghie 2005: 3–5; Jouannet 2007; Keene 2014).

For Aceh, however, this international environment did not automatically create a clash of civilisations with the European empires, nor did it compel the sultans to forsake their Muslim identities or Islamic traditions. Aware of the shifting norms in the global system, Acehnese elites believed that their identities, culture, and faith did not contradict European modernity and progress. They embarked on a self-reform programme, aiming to attain equal-member status in the emerging international order.

Sultan Alauddin Mahmud Shah (r.1760–88), for instance, initiated a series of collaborations with Europeans to consolidate Aceh's influence over its distant territories. These included trade agreements, recruitment of European commanders for

the royal fleet, and professionalisation of the Acehnese army. In the 1770s, Aceh's Sultan Alauddin Mahmud secured a trade agreement with the British East India Company, represented by Charles Desvoeux, to allow British collection of port duties in exchange for regional security (Lee 1995: 42–43). His son, Muhammad Shah (r.1781–95), multilingual and progressive, employed Europeans like Huatt, a Flemish commander, to oversee coastal trade compliance (Lee, 1995, 80–83). Jauhar al-Alam, his successor, further integrated European customs, even maintaining a European-style household, and modernised Aceh's military with European expertise (Lee 1995: 146–63; Reid 2017: 165–67). The alliance with Europe peaked with the knighthood of Stamford Raffles and the 1819 treaty with Britain, which provided Britain extensive trade access and a veto over Aceh's foreign treaties, ensuring Aceh's independence yet aligning it with the 'standard of civilisation' and safeguarding it from international disputes (Lee and Ahmad Adam 1990); Anderson 1840: 218–221). Despite the effort, however, several unforeseen developments in Aceh's geopolitical landscape in the years immediately following 1819 dramatically altered both the sultanate's view of the Eurocentric international order and its standing on the international stage.

In 1819, the Sultan of Aceh could not have anticipated the ramifications of the London Treaty of 1824, the racial stereotyping of Acehnese people as an inferior and declining race by European officials (Marsden 1825: 808; Braddell 1851), and Britain's passive and indifferent stance during the early stages of the Dutch-Aceh conflict in the latter half of the 19th century. The London Treaty, in which Britain deliberately kept the Sultan of Aceh out of the loop, aimed to quell tensions between the Netherlands and Britain by demarcating their spheres of influence. Britain, in exchange for complete control over the Strait Settlements, effectively handed over Sumatra to the

Dutch. The treaty, although vague, still recognised the independence of Aceh (Anderson 1840: 1–3).

As the decades progressed, however, the Netherlands began to encroach upon Aceh's territory. Feeling threatened, Sultan Mansur Shah (r.1838–1870) notified Britain about the Dutch incursion in 1826 but received no response. In 1856, when the Netherlands proposed a friendship treaty with the Sultanate of Aceh, Mansur Shah, in accordance with the treaty in 1819, sought counsel from the British Governor of the Straits settlements, E.A. Blundell. In response, Blundell advised the Acehnese Sultan to sign the treaty, suggesting that it 'would increase Sultan's prestige' (Tarling 1957: 162–65). In March 1857, the Sultanate of Aceh reluctantly signed the Dutch-Aceh treaty, which broadly outlined rules and regulations for maintaining peaceful relations with the Netherlands. Article V, however, held a specific requirement for both Aceh and the Netherlands: the prevention of piracy and slave trading within their respective territories, seas, and other areas of influence (de Klerck 1912: 438–440). The violation of the articles, as claimed by the Netherlands in March 1873, served as the pretext for the Dutch invasion of Aceh in 1873 (Said 1981: 750–753).

Notably, the term piracy was a contentious issue throughout the 19th century. What European or Chinese authorities considered piracy, the Malay states saw as legitimate warfare or statecraft. To incentivise merchant ships to visit their ports, rulers of the Malacca Straits allied with the *orang laut* (sea people), who primarily relied on plundering, foraging, and trading. Under a sultan's authority, the *orang laut* sometimes acted as the ruler's naval power, attacking merchants who traded with rivals or enemies (Reid 2011: 19). In the Malay political system, 'piracy is our birthright and so brings

no disgrace,' Sultan Husain Shah of Johor told Stamford Raffles (Hill 1955: 145).[6] The Aceh-Dutch treaty in 1857 compelled the sultans of Aceh to abandon longstanding legitimate practices to conform to the international standard of civilisation.

The racialisation of Malay Muslims, particularly those from the Sultanate of Aceh, may have contributed to the British passivity or lack of response to the Acehnese appeals from the second quarter of the 19th century onwards. British officials had categorised the human population into hierarchies and depicted Malay Muslims as a declining, inferior race. British historian William Marsden initially classified Aceh as semi-civilised in the late 18th century, but by the 1820s, he described it as being 'in a state of the utmost degradation' (Marsden 1825: 808; 2012: 204). By the 1850s, Thomas Braddell, a British crown counsel of the Straits Settlements, had grouped Acehnese under the Malay (Muslim) race and contended that 'European nations have unanimously agreed in blasting the character of a whole race, by attaching to it a reputation for treachery and blood-thirstiness, which unfortunately is not yet effaced' (Braddell 1851).

Compounding such prejudice was both British and Dutch officers' racialisation of Muslims as a menace, especially following the outbreak of the Indian rebellion in 1857 (Fuerst 2019). Responding to the event, especially after the 1860s, Salomo Keyzer, an expert in Javanese and Islamic law at the Royal Academy of Delft, Netherlands, wrote several volumes of *Onze tijd in Indië* ('Our time in the Indies') in 1860. In his introduction, he located Mecca as an international meeting place where Islam became the driving ideology that might threaten imperial security. Mecca, the cradle of Islam, Keyzer wrote, was at the centre of the England-Persia war, the Indian

[6] Abdullah did not mention the specific year of the conversation. However, it might have happened in 1819 when Stamford Raffles and Sultan Husain Shah signed a formal treaty.

Rebellion, the uprisings in Tunis and Algeria, and unrest in the Netherlands Indies (Jaquet 1980: 289). Both British and Dutch officers' suspicions and anxieties toward the South and Southeast Asian Muslims grew, fearing that fugitives from the Indian rebellion, such as Rahmatullah Kairnawi, would influence the hajj pilgrim from the regions against the European empires (Laffan 2003: 38; Alavi 2011: 1360). Such racial and religious prejudice demonstrated the crisis of imperial legitimacy in global politics.

The 1819 Aceh-British treaty, the London Treaty in 1824, and the racialisation of Malay Muslims revealed the nature of the 19th-century Eurocentric world order. On the one hand, the 1819 Aceh-British treaty acknowledged Aceh's integral role in international society, obligating the sultanate to curtail its international interactions, relinquish sovereignty partially, and grant complete economic access to the British empire. On the other hand, certain British officials viewed the Acehnese people as a degenerate race, justifying their exclusion from negotiations concerning the London Treaty. Despite the appearance of equal membership in the Aceh-British Treaty of 1819, the Sultanate of Aceh was, in practice, unequally incorporated into the Eurocentric international order due to Acehnese inferior racial status in the eyes of the British officers. Furthermore, the fact that Mansur Shah felt compelled to seek British approval underscores the interconnectedness of the 1857 Aceh-Dutch treaty, the 1819 Aceh-Britain Treaty, and the 1824 London Treaty. These treaties collectively curtailed Aceh's diplomatic power and compelled Aceh to renounce its legitimate 'piracy' practice while ceding the entirety of Sumatra to the Netherlands, threatening Aceh's sovereignty.

These developments gradually changed the Acehnese attitude and perception vis-à-vis the Eurocentric international order. From the 1830s, Acehnese racial and religious identities and logic overshadowed their imperial ones. This was obvious, for

instance, in the Sultan of Aceh's diplomatic letter to the Ottoman Sultan, Abdulmejid (r.1839–1861). Sultan Ibrahim Mansur Shah (r.1838–1870) deliberately emphasised the Sultanate's Muslim identity in his letters to the Ottomans in 1849 and 1850, politicising it against the Christian Dutch empire (see Kadı and Peacock: 2020b). This approach was unprecedented, contrasting sharply with a 16th-century letter to Ottoman Sultan Selim II (Casale 2005). That letter depicted the Sultanate of Aceh as one of many rulers along the Indian Ocean and Red Sea routes united against the Portuguese. It described the Portuguese king as a *kafir* but not Portugal as a Christian empire. The term *kafir* in the letter also applied to various rulers seeking to join the Aceh-Ottoman alliance, indicating a sense of common enemy rather than a shared Muslim identity that motivated the alliance (ibid.).

The 19th-century Acehnese letter to the Ottoman Sultan, however, differed significantly. Ibrahim portrayed himself as the legitimate Muslim ruler representing diverse rulers from the Indonesian archipelago while labelling the Dutch as Christian *kafir* threatening and obstructing Islamic faith and traditions. Unlike Sultan Al-Mukammil (r.1589–1604) and Sultan Iskandar Muda (r.1607–36), for instance, who built regional alliances against the Portuguese, Ibrahim Mansur Shah claimed to represent all Muslim subjects and rulers from Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Bali, and Celebes (modern-day Indonesia) (Kadı and Peacock 2020b, 2020c).

It is notable, however, that the Sultan's description of the Dutch as *kafir* to the Ottoman Sultan should not be seen as a simple Muslim-Christian conflict because imperial identities and inter-imperial solidarity and rivalry were still valid during this period. In his various letters to European rulers, Ibrahim still praised Britain and France. He referred to the King of France, Louis-Philippe, as a just ruler of *dar-al-aman* (the abode of peace) and *dar-al-ma'mur* (the abode of prosperity). Until the

1840s, France and Aceh shared a mutual respect towards each other (Reid 1969a: 78–79).

Additionally, the shift of perception in both the Acehnese court and population is observable through their response to the Crimean War (1853–56). Ottoman victory in the war and its immediate acceptance as a member of the Concert of Europe in 1856 at the Treaty of Paris increased the Ottoman international standing as a civilised Muslim empire equal to the European (Aydin 2007, 24; Bull 2012, 14). While the Ottomans, their allies and Russia understood the war within the imperial framework, both the Acehnese court and public perception oscillated between imperial and religious ones.

Having heard of the Ottoman victory, Sultan Mansur Shah decided to send the Ottoman Sultan $10,000 to help cover Crimean War expenses, indicating the Ottoman Sultan's increased prestige in the eyes of the Acehnese Sultan. For the effort, the Ottoman Sultan Abdulmejid rewarded Aceh's Sultan with a *mecidi* decoration (Reid 1969b: 84). *Hikayat Éseutamu* (poem of Istanbul in Acehnese), published in 1869, also reflected a similar view. The *hikayat* presents an intriguing twist on the Crimean War (1853–56) between the Ottoman and Russian empires. In Acehnese poetic style, the story narrates that Raja Beuseutapan, the powerful Russian prince and ruler of Sebastopol, instigated a war with the Ottomans. In response, Sultan Abdulmejid summoned Muslim kings from Yemen, Oman, Persia, Kurdistan, and the Indian Ocean, as well as rulers from Hindustan, Gujarat, Malabar, Bengal, Madras, Riau, Banjar, Pattani, Solo, Semarang, and Cirebon. Allied with the Ottomans were also Britain, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and the United States, all united against Russia. After three months of fighting, the alliance achieved its first victory. However, as the Muslim fleet continued battling the Russians, France, Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States ceased fighting, angering Sultan Abdulmejid. The Sultan then

took up arms against his former allies, killing many. After realising their mistake, the European coalition apologised, and Sultan Abdulmejid eventually forgave them (Fakhriati 2019).

Both the *Hikayat* and the Acehnese Sultan's appeals to the Ottoman Sultan ambiguously reflected the tension between religious identities and logic with the imperial ones. Had the Dutch incursion into Sumatra occurred in the 17th or 18th century, an alliance between Aceh and Britain, who had previously allied against the Portuguese, might have been possible. The Eurocentric international order, however, made the British-Aceh alliance unachievable. As a result, the Acehnese public began viewing international politics through a binary division of religious identity, distinguishing between Muslim and 'infidel' Europeans while still retaining elements of imperial logic and identity by the late 19th century.

In summary, the Eurocentric international order, characterised by racial hierarchies and inequality, significantly influenced the shifting views of the Acehnese sultanate. The London Treaty of 1824 and subsequent British indifference highlighted Aceh's marginalised status, compelling the sultanate to seek alliances with Muslim powers perceived as equally civilised. This evolving international character imposed significant obligations on Aceh, such as conforming to international standards and abandoning traditional practices like piracy whilst its full membership rights was being denied in a global society. Additionally, the Acehnese sultanate's appeals to the Ottoman empire and the changing public perception by the late 19th century, viewing international politics through a binary division of religious identity, underscore the complex interplay between imperial logic and religious solidarity. These dynamics reflect how the increasingly rigid Eurocentric order and racial prejudices of the time reshaped Acehnese identity and diplomacy.

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The betrayal of international society

In November 1870, in the Hague, once again, without informing the Sultanate of Aceh, a significant diplomatic development occurred; the signing of the Anglo-Dutch treaty. Under the terms of this treaty, Britain relinquished its protection of the Sultanate of Aceh in exchange for the Dutch Gold Coast colony. This agreement effectively granted the entirety of Sumatra available to the Netherlands (Reid 1969b: 69–70). By March 1873, the Netherlands Indies government officially accused Aceh of violating the Dutch-Aceh treaty of 1857. They contended that the sultanate had failed to eradicate piracy in the seas surrounding Aceh and had persisted in engaging in the slave trade. Responding to such claims, a Dutch conservative politician, J.L. Nierstrasz, provocatively pointed out in April 1874 that even Dutch colonial rule in Siak, Deli, Jambi, and Lombok failed to prevent piracy and slavery (de Jong 2005: 38). The declaration of treaty violations served as the pretext for the Dutch invasion, stripping the Sultanate of Aceh of its international legitimacy.

Contrary to the widespread assumption, both Sultan Mahmud Shah (r.1870–1873) and the Acehnese ulama did not declare *perang sabil* in response to the attack. Alfian (1987: 21) noted that the Acehnese ulama had only a small role, showcasing that the Acehnese court and public understood the war as an imperial one in the initial phase of the Aceh War (1873–1874). Mahmud Shah promptly dispatched diplomats to various international powers to stop the war. Their objectives were twofold. The first was to negotiate military aid and political protection in exchange for exclusive economic advantages. The diplomats met the representatives of global powers, including Britain, the United States, France, Italy, and the Ottoman empire. In making these appeals, they assumed that the Netherlands, recognised as one of the civilised states of the time, would be receptive to the counsel of other civilised empires. Second,

central to the diplomats' argument was the assertion that Aceh was actively endeavouring to propagate civilisation throughout its region (see Reid 1969a: 100-101). By adopting this stance, they aimed to forestall the Dutch invasion of Aceh and its associated claim of civilising mission.

During this period, however, the prevailing Eurocentric world order, characterised by racial hierarchy and unequal integration, coupled with the continued racialisation of Aceh as an uncivilised nation, had severely tarnished Aceh's international standing. This damage proved to be a devastating blow to the legitimacy of the Sultanate of Aceh as an independent state. Consequently, despite the efforts of Acehnese diplomats to demonstrate progress towards becoming a civilised state, the international society remained reluctant to support the Acehnese cause. They collectively agreed and portrayed the Acehnese as a barbaric nation, posing a threat to the general interests of humanity and superior civilisation.

The comments by various international representatives encapsulated the international views on Aceh. The head of the Netherlands Indies Department of Justice in Batavia (now Jakarta) said, 'International law, as they have developed in the civilised Christian world, was only applicable to civilised nations.' Because political and moral motives are absent in Aceh, he claimed, 'international law ceased to be binding' (Woltring 1962a: 88–89; Kuitenbrouwer 1991: 112). Khalil Pasha, the Ottoman Minister of Foreign Affairs, mirrored this racialised perspective, confirming the Ottoman position in the Aceh-Dutch conflict. He guaranteed that the Ottomans would not heed the 'savage princes' (Woltring 1962b: 478–479). Italian Minister E. Visconti Venosta convinced the Dutch ambassador that the less-civilised Aceh would lose to the mighty Dutch (Woltring 1962b: 684–689). Meanwhile, the German Secretary of Foreign Affairs, B.E. von Bülow, justified the Dutch invasion of Aceh as

necessary to protect the civilised states against the 'wild tribes' (Woltring 1962b: 650–651). France remained conspicuously silent upon receiving the Acehnese pleas for help, a silence interpreted by the Netherlands as a gesture of goodwill (Reid 1969a: 142). As for the United States, Mahmud Shah offered President Ulysses S. Grant the entirety of Weh Island (Sabang Island) in return for American support. He even planned to meet President Grant in Washington if necessary. However, President Grant declined the offer, only considering a commercial treaty if Aceh were to remain independent after the war (Reid 1969a: 74–114).

Moreover, Aceh's entreaty became the focal point of significant discourse among the Muslim populace in Istanbul, emerging as *la grande question du jour*, especially during the first Dutch invasion (Reid 1969b: 121). In response to mounting pressure from influential Istanbul-based journals like *Basiret*, the Ottoman court extended an offer to mediate the conflict between the Netherlands and the Sultanate of Aceh. However, this Ottoman initiative was of brief duration, as Russia demanded that the Ottomans refrain from involvement in the Aceh-Dutch conflict (Reid 1969b: 123). Unlike the Ottoman public, the majority of the Dutch and French public rallied behind the Dutch invasion of Aceh. Even liberal voices in the press, such as *Arnhemsche Courant, De Standaard,* and *Tijd,* lent their support to the war. *Het Vaderland*, a Dutch left-liberal paper, while sympathetic to the Acehnese, justified their empire's military campaign in the name of Dutch security (Kuitenbrouwer 1991: 98–99). A liberal theologian and clergyman, Albert Réville, penned an extensive essay in the esteemed fortnightly French magazine *Revue des Deux Mondes* in July 1874. He concurred that the Dutch invasion of Aceh was legitimate and necessary for the sake of humanity. A superior civilisation had the right, Réville (1874) argued, to subjugate and correct any barbaric nation, let alone Aceh, which continually violated fundamental laws with its

treason, piracy, robbery, and rape. In his view (Réville 1874), the Acehnese deserved to lose their independence. A year earlier, Réville had provided an intriguing commentary shortly after the defeat of the first Dutch invasion of Aceh. He asserted that the Aceh War held extraordinary European interest as there was such moral solidarity among Europeans. According to Réville, the weakening of the Netherlands as a European power would fundamentally affect the prestige and the power of all European nations (Mazade 1873). To be sure, while there were dissenting voices opposing the Dutch invasion of Aceh and questioning its legitimacy, the majority agreed on characterising Aceh as an uncivilised nation that posed a threat to the general interests of humanity and superior civilisation. Consequently, international society endorsed the Dutch war against Aceh and rebranded Dutch imperial ambitions as a global humanitarian endeavour, equating Aceh's quest for freedom with a crisis of humanity.

In a context where the international society framed the Aceh War as a struggle between the 'civilised' and the 'savage,' the Netherlands felt justified in employing all modes of warfare, even those violating the norms of a civilised nation. Strategies such as brutal indiscriminate killings, burning villages, the extermination of entire populations, execution of captured combatants, and intentional indirect genocidal tactics like scorched earth campaigns and the destruction of the living environment became commonplace. The level of violence committed by the Dutch forces was so extreme that a former Dutch officer who had participated in the Aceh War accused the Dutch government of *volkerenmoord*, the modern Dutch term for genocide (Kreike 2012; 2021: chp. 9).

Had the Eurocentric international society, especially Britain and the Ottomans, directly intervened in the Dutch incursion sometime before the late 1870s, fatwa *perang sabil* would not have occurred. Acehnese diplomatic correspondences from

1873 until the end of the decade constantly expressed their frustration that no help would come to Aceh. Abdurrahman al-Zahir (1833–1896), Aceh's diplomatic envoy to the Ottoman empire, was probably the first man to strongly voice such hopelessness. Having failed to secure protection from the Ottoman sultan, he felt that no powers from the Eurocentric international community would come to help (Reid 1969b: 158). Acehnese leader Teuku Imam Lueng Bata also expressed similar desperation in a letter to al-Zahir. '[I]f not or if it is impossible to get … help, it is better that you return here, for it is better to return than to remain … and not make any useless promises …', he wrote in late April 1874 (Reid 1969a: 103–104). Al-Zahir returned to Aceh in early 1876 after several attempts to persuade Britain to mediate on the Dutch-Acehnese issue from 1874 to 1876. For the next two years, his return gained tremendous enthusiasm from the Acehnese coastal nobilities (*raja-raja kecil*), which showcased his prominent influence in Aceh (Reid 1972: 57). However, as the war conditions only worsened, he decided to leave Aceh and retired to Arabia in 1878 (Özay 2020: 95–96). Such developments, the silence of international society, and the desperation of Acehnese society facing the Dutch colonial violence fundamentally altered the character of the Aceh War from an imperial to a religious one by the end of the 1870s.

In explaining the changing character of the Aceh War, Alfian (1987) divides the war into three interconnected and overlapping phases. The first phase, he describes, was when the Acehnese sultan or his deputies led the war. The second phase started when the *uleebalang* (local district ruler) took charge, especially after the death of Sultan Mahmud. Al-Zahir's attempt to stop or mitigate the Aceh War happened during this phase. When he retired from Aceh in 1878, the third phase had just commenced. As the Acehnese sultanate and *uleebalang* had failed to stop or mitigate the war, more and more ulama gradually took the leading role and subsequently turned the war into a

religious one. Teungku Muhammad Amin Dayah Cot Tiro, among the first of many Acehnese ulama, declared *perang sabil* in December 1877 (Alfian 1987: 9–10, 107). A decade later, Acehnese ulama penned diverse versions of *Hikayat perang sabil*; thus within a decade, the idea of *perang sabil* had become widespread in Aceh.

Over a period of about 50 years, from the American attack on Aceh in 1832 to the 1880s, the amalgamation of the Eurocentric global structure that privileged hierarchical and unequal ordering, the persistent racialisation of Acehnese as an inferior race, the international society's tacit acceptance of Acehnese destruction, and the colonial genocide, had coerced the Acehnese to relinquish their multiple and cosmopolitan imperial identities and instead assert their Muslim identity in defence of their right to be an independent state.

Thus, the Acehnese *perang sabil* fatwa was not exclusively a natural response to the invasion from European colonialists. Instead, it emerged out of desperation owing to the silence and approval of the Eurocentric international community: Britain, France, the United States, Italy, and the Ottomans. Not only did they approve of the Dutch invasion and massacre of the Acehnese population, but they even refashioned the invasion as a humanitarian intervention owing to the international uncivilised status ascribed to the Acehnese.

Comparing Teungku Kutakarang's fatwa of jihad in the closing 19th century with the one by al-Palimbani in an earlier century, significant differences are apparent. In al-Palimbani's letter declaring jihad to the ruler in Java in 1778, there was not any mention of racial (white) identity, only religious identity (see Azra 2004: 141–42; Ricklefs 2006: 172). Mohammad Hussain Ahmad (2017) even argues that the al-Palimbani's fatwa was simply compiling Islamic texts and explaining them to his

people instead of fanatical exhortation to wage war against infidels, which did not have any notable impact in Java (Azra 2004: 143; Ahmad 2017: 248).

On the contrary, referencing al-Palimbani's fatwa, the Acehnese ulama in the closing decades of the 19th century imbued racial and religious identities justifying *perang sabil*. Acehnese ulama, such as Teungku Kutakarang, characterised the European empires as competing with each other but united by racial (white) identity in his pamphlet, *Tadhkirat al-Raqidin*. He explained that *Ulanda* (the Dutch) claimed to bring civilisation— 'happiness',[7] wealth, cheap commodities, European culture, and law – to replace Islamic society. However, in reality, he asserted that the Netherlands had destroyed the moral and social structures of people in Padang, Deli, Madura, Java, and other Malay areas. Thus, once it established its rule over Aceh, the Netherlands would also bring social destruction, displacement, and suffering (Kutakarang 2014: 55–56, 58–59). The Acehnese would lose their freedom, and then the Dutch would conscript them into forced labour one day per week. They would also impose a universal tax, and each newborn child would need to pay one dollar (Iskandar 1986: 94–95). The Dutch would ensure Muslim dependence on Europeans, making them like 'a bird in its cage, powerless to escape, hence [they] will not have enough power to resist' (Kutakarang: 2014: 56).

For the Netherlands, the subjugation of Aceh was crucial because it had ceded the Gold Coast, West Africa, to Britain in the Sumatra Treaty of 1871 in exchange for Britain retracting its protection of Aceh. This according to Kutakarang, as the Dutch invasion of Aceh was also a matter of Eurocentric (white) international prestige, the Netherlands aimed to either totally subjugate Aceh or utterly destroy it. If they failed to

[7] Happiness was the word Governor van der Heijden used during his address to Acehnese *uleebalang*, ulama, and other Acehnese leaders (see Kreike 2012: 304).

subjugate and profit from Aceh, the Dutch would destroy the sultanate and 'banish them to be colonised by other nations' (Kutakarang 2014: 68–69, 71).

Additionally, while Sultan Mahmud, Aceh's last, still hoped for Ottoman aid in 1898, Teungku Chik di Tiro, another Acehnese ulama espousing *perang sabil*, turned his inspiration to Sudan and Egypt. He connected Acehnese *perang sabil* to the Mahdi movement in Northern Africa and Egypt. 'The Mahdi has already manifested in Sudan and Egypt, and he is waging war in those lands. How many kingdoms have already submitted to him, and how many millions of unbelievers … have already been killed by the warriors of the Mahdi!'(Kesteren and Wijnmalen 1885: 666). Amid the increasing fame of the Ottoman sultan in the Malay world, Chik di Tiro's invocation of the Sudanese Mahdi seemed unique. This is even more so when comparing that to the practice of ulama and the royal courts in Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Kelantan, and Brunei where they invoked the Ottoman as the protector (Malhi 2015: Kadı and Peacock 2020a: 391–392). This may indicate that Chik di Tiro had also lost hope in the Ottoman as a member of the Eurocentric international community. Thus, he perceived that *perang sabil* was the only way to protect themselves.

Overall, Acehnese *perang sabil* emerged out of the abandonment and betrayal by the international community, coupled with the extreme violence of the Dutch invasion. These factors pushed the Acehnese to adopt a religious war stance in defence of their sovereignty and freedom. The Acehnese ulama also expressed a profound sense of desperation and hopelessness, as the global powers not only failed to assist but also endorsed the Dutch aggression under the guise of humanitarian intervention.

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Conclusion

Perang sabil, the Malay term for holy war, this article contends, was not a natural Muslim reaction against the invading infidels or *kafir*. On the contrary, during the first and second Dutch invasions of Aceh from 1873 until 1874, the Sultanate of Aceh, through its diplomats, sought to avert the war by engaging with Eurocentric ideas and the international standard of civilisation and progress as defined by the international society of that era. However, as the Eurocentric international society of the 19th century persistently portrayed Aceh as a 'degenerate' race and sustained the racial hierarchy and unequal integration, they brushed aside Acehnese pleas to maintain their independence. The betrayal by the international society, the Dutch *volkerenmoord* (genocide), and the scorched earth policy that displaced and killed thousands of Acehnese warriors and civilians led the Acehnese to perceive the Aceh War as an existential threat. Consequently, a decade after the Dutch invasion of Aceh, Acehnese ulama declared *perang sabil*.

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