



GENDER AND POWER IN INDONESIAN ISLAM

Leaders, feminists, Sufis and *pesantren* selves

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ROUTLEDGE

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2 Leadership and authority

Women leading *dayah* in Aceh

Asna Husin

This chapter explores Muslim women in positions of leadership and authority in Acehnese *dayah* (a traditional Islamic boarding school for the study of the Qur'an, Hadith and other classical Islamic texts, also known as *pesantren*). It is a biographic-ethnographic analysis that examines the lives and experiences of two contemporary female *dayah* founders and their rise to leadership as they studied in male-led *dayah*. In doing so, the chapter reveals the dynamic relations between female and male leaders and the important role of leaders' wives and daughters in *dayah*. The chapter includes an overview of the development of the *dayah* institution from its historical inception to its contemporary significance in providing religious education for the masses, an examination of the role of women under male-*dayah* leadership based on the narratives of the two female leaders, and current activities of these women as teachers and leaders in their respective *dayah* and communities to reveal the fluidity of their positions in a male-dominated *dayah* culture.

***Dayah* history and development**

The Acehnese name *dayah* derives from the Arabic *zawiyah* (study corner or lodge), and today denotes a privately established and funded Islamic boarding school.¹ It is said to refer originally to a corner in the Prophet's mosque in Madinah where the Prophet Muhammad taught his companions in the early years of his prophetic mission in that city (Amiruddin n.d.; Haspy 1987: 7). As Islam expanded, the use of mosques and their corner spaces as teaching sites continued to meet the need for religious education. From the tenth century *zawiyah* became associated with Sufis, who utilized the place as both a temporary living court and a learning centre or lodge. One such *zawiyah* was the Hilaliyyah Zawiyah in Aleppo, Syria, constructed in 1790 to accommodate the mausoleum for Shaykh Muhammad Hilal Ram Hamdani. It is probable that *zawiyah* were introduced into Aceh during the early introduction of Islam to the region in the ninth to twelfth centuries, and the name became transformed in local rendering as *dayah*. Though the name *pesantren* was utilized by many of the newly founded *dayah* in the 1980s and early 1990s, the re-emergence of religious, cultural and political awareness among

Acehnese intellectuals and religious elites from the late 1990s onwards led to the reappropriation of this more Islamic and indigenous term.² Currently, almost all private Islamic boarding schools in Aceh describe themselves as *dayah*, even though their legal foundation documents might have been drawn up using the term *pesantren*.

The *dayah* or *pesantren* is held to represent the oldest continuously existing learning institution in Aceh and throughout the Muslim Southeast Asia region. According to the prominent Acehnese historian, Ali Hasjmy (1980), the first known centre of Islamic learning in the region was Dayah Cot Kala in East Aceh, founded sometime in the ninth century, having teachers from Arab lands, Persia and India. The alumni of this *dayah* are thought to have contributed to the emergence of other *dayah* in various Islamic kingdoms across Aceh and Sumatra, including the Islamic Sultanates of Peureulak, Samudra Pasai, Benua, Lingga and Indra Jaya (Departemen Agama 1993; Hasjmy 1997; Shabri *et al.* 2007). In the thirteenth century, the famous Dayah Kan'an was founded in Aceh Besar by Shaykh 'Abdallah Kan'an, a merchant and missionary of Palestinian lineage. As Islamic learning centres, *dayah* spread along with the wider reach of Islam into Aceh and throughout the region, and by the era of Dutch arrival in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries every area in the Sultanate of Aceh had a *dayah* associated with an *ulama* (Muslim scholar). Abd al-Rauf al-Sinkili, who served Aceh's four Sultanahs for thirty-two years as their *Qadi Malik al-Adil* (a scholar who was responsible not only for religious life in the Sultanate but also for maintaining the court's sociopolitical equilibrium) (Halimi 2008: 314–16; Hasjmy 1983: 119–20), along with his disciple Daud al-Jawi al-Rumi, founded a *dayah* in Banda Aceh (Azra 2004: 86).³ During the nineteenth century Dayah Teungku Chiek Di Tiro in Pidie, Dayah Teungku Chiek Kuta Karang in North Aceh and Dayah Tanoh Abee in Aceh Besar were some of the most well-recognized learning institutions in Aceh. In addition to functioning as learning centres, the *dayah* during this era also operated as a base for political resistance against Dutch encroachments, since many *dayah* founders or leaders were at the same time resistance fighters and revolutionary leaders against foreign oppression (Aceh Traffic 2011; Sufi 2008).

The *dayah* was the sole educational institution not only in Aceh, but in other Muslim societies throughout the region as well, until the introduction of the modern school (In. *sekolah*) by the Dutch in the early twentieth century. Some of the most significant *dayah* of this period were Dayah Krung Kale founded by Teungku Hasan Krung Kale (1883–1973) and Dayah Lam Diran by Teungku Fakinah in Aceh Besar, Dayah Meunasah Meucap by Teungku Abdurrahman Meunasah Meucap (1897–1949) in North Aceh, and Dayah Ujong Rimba by Teungku Abdullah Ujong Rimba (1900–59) in Pidie. The introduction of a European-style educational system forced the *ulama* to review and modernize *dayah* education, and a combination of the two systems was manifested in the adoption of the *madrrasah* system (as modern Islamic schools) (Sufi 2009), in contrast to the *sekolah*, as a religiously neutral learning institution.⁴

The call by *ulama* for modernization of *dayah* implies that this learning institution could no longer meet the demands of the new era. One reason can be related to the *dayah* curriculum, which focused exclusively on religious subjects at the expense of the pragmatic or general sciences (*pengetahuan umum*) (Jailani 2010; Sufi 2009). Thus, modernization of Muslim education through the creation of the *madrasah* was an attempt at advancing a new generation of educated Muslims who possessed both religious and secular knowledge in order to meet the needs at that time (Sufi 2009). Since its introduction, the Islamic school or *madrasah* seemed to adjust to the social reality driven by the government, but the *dayah* fell into the trap of over-emphasizing certain religious subjects, and remains in a continuing struggle to improve. Most *dayah* leaders realize the importance of transformation in order to meet the challenge of the modern era, and therefore they are willing to subscribe to positive improvement even though it is a very slow process.

Dayah continue to evolve and adjust to the social and religious requirements of their surrounding communities, mainly because the existence within some *dayah* communities of a certain impetus for change, especially among a younger generation of leaders and the long history of teaching certain advanced and comprehensive topics that included both Islamic and general sciences. This includes the teaching of philosophy, logic, and the natural sciences, humanities and even technical skills. A holistic approach to teaching was demonstrated by certain *dayah* in Aceh even after their decline – Dayah Teungku Chiek Di Pasi in Pidie may serve as an example. Teungku Chiek Di Pasi in the eighteenth century taught in his *dayah* ways to improve agriculture and mobilized his students and community to build irrigation and water channels 40 kilometres long in order to support farming and to improve the quality of farmers' lives (Hardiansyah 2010: 24). His was an important heroic act of development for his time, remembered for generations to come. Therefore, despite the evident decline in *dayah* education, it continues to be both empowering and liberating, especially those led by younger leaders and women, as we will see below.

Women in male-led *dayah*

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several prominent women *ulama* (or *teungku inong*, Aceh. female religious scholar) played major roles in developing Islamic education in the *dayah*, including Teungku Fakinah (1856–1938), who founded and taught at Dayah Lam Diran in Aceh Besar. Teungku Fakinah is also believed to have established another *dayah* during her exile by the Dutch colonials in Tangse (Pidie) in a village known as Blang Peuneuluen, after the fall of the area she helped defend. Another outstanding figure was Teungku Cutpo Fatimah (d. 1912), who promoted education as the daughter of the famous Teungku Chiek Mata Ie. Both Teungku Fakinah and Teungku Cutpo Fatimah were famous heroines of Aceh who led local regiments to defend their homeland from brutal Dutch encroachments. These two *teungku* are

today better remembered for their political and revolutionary engagements than for their important educational endeavours.

Women continue to play important roles in the development of Islamic boarding schools in Aceh. A very conservative estimate is that there are more than 700 *dayah* or *pesantren* in the province and that they provide education for more than 100,000 children and young adults, which is around 13 per cent of the student population. Even though a large majority of these *dayah* were founded and are presided over by male *ulama* (Aceh. *teungku agam*), women are nevertheless important because they maintain the balance in the dynamics of male–female relations in gender segregated religious settings. The role of women can be best appreciated when one looks at the fact that a sizable number of the students in these Islamic boarding schools are female. Though the data are not very precise, it may be asserted that, unlike in other parts of Indonesia, in Aceh the majority of *dayah* students are male, comprising between 55 to 65 per cent of the overall *dayah* student population. However, when one distinguishes between the *dayah salafi* (traditional *dayah*) and the *dayah terpadu* (modern *dayah*), one gains a different picture. Male students then comprise between 55 to 70 per cent of the student population in the *dayah salafi*, while female students comprise 55 to 70 per cent in the *dayah terpadu*. More research remains to be carried out on these religious boarding schools and gender specificities. Women's engagement in the *dayah* can also be viewed from another angle. The wives (known by Acehnese honourable titles such as *Mi*, *Mi Nyak* or *Teungku Nyak*) and daughters of *teungku* interact with female students by offering guidance and moral insights on behalf of their husbands or fathers as leader. In addition, many *teungku* in Aceh entrust female students with responsibility, especially in the management and leadership of their schools. Furthermore, several *dayah* were founded by and are led by women, demonstrating the responsibility of female religious leaders in safeguarding values and promoting positive change within Aceh's *dayah* culture and its larger social context.

Women comprise approximately 1.5 to 2 per cent of *dayah* leadership in Aceh at present, for there are only ten or fifteen women among the 700 *dayah* leaders. However, an overwhelming majority of the popular *balee beuets* (afternoon or evening classes for the study of the Qur'an and principles of religion for younger children) are run by women. These fall outside the *dayah* category and thus outside the purview of this chapter. To understand gender disparity in the *dayah* settings, one needs to take into account categorizations of *dayah*, such as those of *pesantren* in Java and other places across the region. As mentioned earlier, there are two types of *dayah*: *salafi* and *terpadu*. The former, *dayah salafi*, teaches religious and Islamic traditional sciences almost exclusively and initially forbade students to attend modern schools (such as *sekolah* or *madrasah*). It uses mostly Jawi (Malay language written in Arabic script) or Arabic classical texts and offers boarding facilities for students (like a *pesantren*). The *dayah terpadu* contrasts by offering modern *madrasah* education

(with a government curriculum) in combination with religious sciences as part of the *dayah* curriculum. In fact, many *dayah terpadu* operate a *sekolah* or *madrasah* in their *dayah* compounds. In both types of *dayah* a gender imbalance occurs, because higher-level classes in male-led *dayah* are taught by men. Male teachers teach both male and female students, while female teachers are assigned to instruct female students with a few exceptions.

In contrast, most teachers in the lower-level classes are women and they teach both boy and girl students. The second feature to note is that more than 50 per cent of *dayah terpadu* students are female. But, *dayah terpadu* consist of only 35 per cent of the entire *dayah* in Aceh, and the rest are either *dayah salafi* or *dayah* that admit male students exclusively. A very small number of *dayah* admit female students solely and one of these is Dayah Diniyyah Fathimiyyah in Pidie, led by Teungku Fatimah Cut. Contrary to *dayah terpadu*, only one third of the *dayah salafi* students are female, but their numbers shrink further within the higher-level classes, with the result that fewer women actually complete advanced courses. This is clearly one explanation for the dearth of women in *dayah* leadership. Yet, among those few who do complete their classes, rarely do they establish their own *dayah* by following the old tradition of disseminating knowledge by founding one's own learning institution. The two women interviewed here are among those very few, and it is through their eyes that I explore the dynamics of gender relations in a predominantly male-constructed *dayah* culture.

Women leaders

The Muslim women examined in this chapter are from two different geographical areas. Ummi Hanisah is from Southwest Central Aceh and Teungku Rahimun is from Northeast Coastal Aceh. These two leaders occupy distinct positions in the political landscape of Aceh; the former is a member, and was an unelected candidate, of the local political party Partai Aceh; and the latter is politically neutral. Ummi Hanisah can be described as a revolutionary, while Teungku Rahimun demonstrates a calm characteristic; yet both are rigorous in the pursuit of their religio-intellectual and gender-social objectives. Ummi Hanisah studied continuously in one *dayah* from the beginning of her *dayah* education, experiencing three different *dayah* leaders during her nine years of study. Teungku Rahimun studied at two different *dayah*, one in the north and the other in the south of Aceh, where the two women met and formed a strong partnership. Although both founded and lead *dayah salafis* in accordance with their respective *dayah* education, their *dayah* are slightly different. Ummi Hanisah's Diniyyah Darussalam is similar to a *dayah terpadu*, for she has established a *madrasah* in her *dayah* compound offering students the opportunity to acquire a combined religious and secular education. In contrast, Teungku Rahimun's Dayah Ar-Rahmah remains purely *salafi*, where boarding students do not receive a modern education, although many of her non-boarding students who study at her *dayah* during the day are

pupils of different schools or *madrrasah*. In this way, her *dayah* is not purely *salafi*.

Ummi Hanisah

Ummi Hanisah comes from a family of revolutionary fighters and became interested in becoming a *teungku* at an early age.⁵ After finishing her religious and formal primary and secondary education in her village in West Aceh, she went on travel in search of religious knowledge by enrolling in the *Dayah Darussalam, Labuhan Haji, South Aceh*. This *dayah salafi* was, and still is, one of the most famous *dayah* in Aceh, with over 1,500 male and female pupils, and is led by a notable *ulama* family, the Wali family. When she arrived in the *dayah* in 1988 at the age of 18, she was admitted to the *dayah puteri* (female branch) at the primary (*ibtidai*) level, as opposed to secondary (*thanawi*) or advanced, equal to high school level ('*ali*). The *dayah* at that time was under the leadership of the late Teungku Nasir Wali. Hanisah studied hard and learned mostly from female teachers in the first two years, and occasionally had a chance to listen to the Teungku as he gave public lectures in the *dayah* mosque or in the local community. She was also selected to be the head of her dormitory and became a teacher in her third year of residency. As her desire to learn more from the leader grew, she decided to stay on during her long holidays and entered the inner circle of the Teungku family, assisting them as a treasurer for the *dayah*, and became part of the family. She said, 'I learned a great deal from Abu Nasir in this way and became close to Ummi [his wife] and his young children.' When the Teungku moved away to establish his own *dayah*, his older brother Teungku Mawardi Wali replaced him as leader.

Teungku Mawardi is one of the most important figures in Ummi Hanisah's *dayah* life. She explained, 'He is a very open-minded leader with a prudent wife and three intelligent young daughters who were all active in the *dayah*. His first daughter, who was in a high school [*sekolah*] at the time, was my role model even though she was younger than me.' In addition to studying in a public school, his daughter was also a teacher and a student in the *dayah* and, Ummi Hanisah continued, 'We often studied together and the Abu treated us equally as if I was one of his own daughters.' By this time, Ummi Hanisah was known as 'Teungku Meulaboh', named after her hometown, and was assigned to teach primary and secondary students.⁶ Furthermore, she had been entrusted to represent the Teungku in his absence in the day-to-day management of the *dayah*, including supervising both male and female students, arranging *tarekat* (Sufi order) meetings, managing the *dayah* business of rice paddy factories and other income-generating activities, as well as entertaining guests. It was the habit of Teungku Mawardi to spend three months a year at another *dayah* in Padang Panjang, West Sumatra, to which he later returned to lead full-time. Ummi Hanisah said, 'Teungku Mawardi treated male and female students equally and gave us the same opportunity to

progress. We had the same chance as the male students to learn from him if we wished to. We felt he even sometimes paid more attention to us women and encouraged us to excel beyond our initial expectation.' By this time Teungku Rahimun had arrived to continue her study in this *dayah* and the two became the Teungku's beloved students. Ummi Hanisah was his representative and Rahimun was her assistant.

In addition to being entrusted with managing the *dayah* during the absence of the Teungku, Ummi Hanisah was also challenged to teach students of higher classes and to read an Islamic textbook (*kitab*) called *I'alah al-Talibin* for a class of teachers. She explained that, 'Even though I had no self-confidence since I had not taught that *kitab* before, I could not say "no" to my teacher.' Realizing that the Teungku's request was not made without positive intention or without reviewing her academic ability, Ummi Hanisah accepted the challenge and taught this text to a class of students who were mostly older than her and more experienced academically. She elaborated, 'This was one of the most difficult challenges I had received from the Abu, but after this first test I could perform such academic tasks with full confidence.' Although she taught female students exclusively, she often dealt with male students and teachers in her managerial tasks, because, as Rahimun explained, 'The Teungku entrusted us increasingly when it came to the day-to-day business of the *dayah*. We were relied on because we women have pure hearts, are trustworthy, responsible and sincere.' The academic and leadership opportunities available in this Islamic boarding school enabled Ummi Hanisah to mature quickly, and by the time she left the *dayah* in 1996 she walked out full of energy and with a confident vision to found and manage her own *dayah*. Her academic experience was further enriched after she completed her Bachelor's degree in 2001 at the local college of Tarbiyah Teungku in Rondeng, Meulaboh.

Ummi Hanisah could be considered as a reformer even when she was still a student. During her student days, male teachers taught female students behind the *tabeng* (cloth screen) in order to prevent eye contact between unrelated male teachers and women pupils. However, this screen prevented teachers from knowing what transpired behind it in the female section. Ummi Hanisah observed that most female students were not learning: some were sleeping in the class, others were busy talking among themselves, and yet others left the class entirely – while the teachers on the other side of the divide were lecturing. Uneasy with what she witnessed, Ummi Hanisah continuously complained to the teachers, but none were able to make any adjustments. She finally brought the case to the head of the *dayah* – Teungku Nasir himself – to inform him of the situation. After some consideration, Teungku Nasir accepted her request and changed the *dayah* policy concerning male–female teaching relations. This alteration generated a controversy within this *dayah* community, but, as the benefits of the new policy were far greater than its perceived disadvantages, the new way prevailed. As the order for change came from the Teungku himself, nobody attempted to manipulate or politicize the situation; individuals opposed to this move expressed it

quietly in a genuinely religious manner. After a short while, the controversy subsided and the new way became the accepted norm. Teungku Rahimun, who arrived in the *dayah* after this change had occurred, observed that 'The ability to see and discuss issues with teachers during the teaching-learning process is much more rewarding for women.'

Teungku Rahimun

While Ummi Hanisah spent all of her *dayah* years in the Dayah Darussalam, Teungku Rahimun entered *dayah* education by joining a female Islamic boarding school called Dayah Puteri Muslimat in Bireuen, North Aceh, after completing high school in one of the most prestigious schools in Banda Aceh. Rahimun graduated from Sekolah Menengah Atas (SMA) 3, Banda Aceh, in 1988. Coming from a military and business-oriented family, and wishing to become a *teungku*, was challenging. Inspired by her female village religious teacher, Teungku Jeumala, Rahimun developed in herself a strong sense of responsibility and desire to become a religious scholar. When she told her family about her plan, they dismissed it automatically, viewing it as a young child's temporary wish. In spite of her persistence, her parents enrolled Rahimun in secondary school, and then high school. While in school Rahimun continued to express her wish, and as a demonstration of her seriousness she opened a *balee beuet* for village children in her own home. By this time she had already moved to her father's village in Aceh Besar while she studied in a high school in Banda Aceh. She maintained her relations with Teungku Jeumala and visited her occasionally during the holidays.

Upon completing high school in 1988, Rahimun's parents finally agreed to her aspiration and she was enrolled in the Dayah Puteri Muslimat in Samalanga, Bireuen. This was the same *dayah* that her female village teacher Teungku Jeumala had studied at, and was led by Teungku Nuruzzahri, best known as Waled Nu.⁷ Rahimun took to heart this opportunity to study in a *dayah* and she learned diligently. She even brought twelve other girls from her village to study in the same *dayah* a year later, and became the leader of her class. Due to her leadership skills and academic achievement Rahimun became a trusted student of Waled Nu, and assumed the title 'Teungku Bilek' (referring to *dayah* students' living quarters). The young *teungku* was also given the task of teaching her peers in the absence of their regular teachers. Like Ummi Hanisah at Dayah Darussalam, Teungku Rahimun took every opportunity to learn directly from Waled Nu, and often stayed in the *dayah* during the holidays in order to gain access to the leader's inner family circle. She became close to Waled Nu's wife. She explained, 'I learned from Bunda (In. literally, 'mother' or 'aunt') as much as from the Waled, for she was a great *ulama*⁸ herself. I also learned from her about the commitment to family, endurance in hardship and wisdom behind all events. She was truly the bedrock of the Waled and all of us children.' After two and a half years in this girls-only *dayah*, Teungku Rahimun wanted to move to Dayah Darussalam in

South Aceh. Waled Nu encouraged her to stay, but due to her persistence, he finally blessed her move.

The towns of Salamanga and Labuhan Haji in Aceh are both famous for *dayah* education. Samalanga in North Aceh is home to a number of *dayah*, including the famous Dayah Mudi Mesra, which has more than 3,000 students. Similarly, Labuhan Haji in South Aceh is also home to a number of *dayah*, the most famous being Dayah Darussalam founded by Abuya Shaykh Muda Wali al-Khalidi. Of those choices, Teungku Rahimun selected the latter for several reasons. As she explained, 'I had heard and learned a great deal about the Dayah Darussalam through its alumni who came from Aceh Besar, and I was impressed by their academic and spiritual qualifications.' Teungku Rahimun was also encouraged by the great name of its founder and his children, all of whom became *ulama*. In addition, she knew that many famous *ulama* of Aceh, including Abu Daud Zamzami, had graduated from Dayah Darussalam.⁹

Teungku Rahimun arrived in Labuhan Haji in 1990, at which time the *dayah* was led by Teungku Mawardi. As she had reached some religious and intellectual maturity in Samalanga, Rahimun entered the new *dayah* with ease and confidence. Yet, she was placed at the primary level for six months as a placement test for her knowledge and skills before being upgraded to secondary level, and studied in this rank for two years. She was immediately embraced by the leadership and was admitted to the inner circle of the Teungku's family. Together with Ummi Hanisah, she explained, 'We became the "golden children" or the apple of Teungku Mawardi's eye.' As she had done in Dayah Puteri, she made every effort to learn directly from the Teungku through his lectures, informal classes and family gatherings, especially during holidays. She continued, 'I stayed in the Dayah, along with Hanisah even when other students returned to their villages. In this way we would have more opportunities to learn directly from Teungku Mawardi.' When he travelled, Teungku Mawardi entrusted both women to represent him. Like Ummi Hanisah, Teungku Rahimun was also given opportunities to teach her juniors and she loved it, for she said that 'Teaching forces us to actualize our knowledge and to learn more.' Rahimun also benefited from the companionship she shared with the Teungku's wife and their children.

The wife of Teungku Mawardi and their daughters were very active in the *dayah*. The young girls, especially the eldest, were students and teachers for the other pupils. They studied in school in the morning and read religious texts in the evening. Teungku Rahimun explained that 'The girls treated us like their own sisters, full of respect and love.' Similarly, Teungku's wife played a great role in the management of the *dayah*, and she also taught female classes and gave lectures in the community. She added, 'I often saw the Teungku consult his wife, Ummi [Ar. mother] before making certain decisions. The involvement of his wife in the *dayah* and in forming our characters was significant.' Rahimun continued, 'She taught us and her children to uphold the truth, to be independent and to understand the spirit of knowledge and the superiority of the heart. "Knowledge," she sometimes said, "should

function as a purification of the heart.” Teungku Rahimun considered Teungku Mawardi’s wife to be a great Sufi teacher, who practised the knowledge she preached and who demonstrated the nobility of character through word and deed. She was also a ‘role model’ who could be considered a gender activist who never talked about gender equity, but always treated everyone with dignity, equality and respect, because she and her husband valued equality.

When Teungku Rahimun was asked to compare her experiences in Dayah Samalanga with Labuhan Haji she mentioned the following distinctions: Dayah Puteri Muslimat emphasized the importance of knowledge and intelligence (*aql*) and challenged students on intellectual grounds, while Dayah Darussalam highlighted the necessity of knowledge with renunciation (*zuhud*) and purification of the heart. Thus, in Labuhan Haji, she said, ‘We engaged in the *tarekat* of Naqshbandiyya and learned the principles of *tasawwuf* [mysticism] and interior knowledge of the heart [*ilm al-batin*].’¹⁰ Dayah Samalanga was markedly Salafi and observed a radical segregation between female students and male teachers. As a result, male teachers taught women behind the curtain and female students never practised lecturing or rhetorical expression in front of male teachers. She continued, ‘I think this was not the policy of the Waled because he was very flexible and open-minded. But he followed it out of respect for his father-in-law who founded the *dayah* and set up such a practice.’ She further stated that ‘Learning without seeing the teacher is not satisfactory.’

By contrast, Dayah Labuhan Haji embraced a reformist approach where male teachers taught female students without any curtain, and female students could practise lecturing and rhetorical expression in front of male teachers as well as fellow male students. Teungku Rahimun explained, ‘We had rhetoric competition every year and both male and female students were encouraged to participate. I once received first prize.’ Another distinction between the two *dayah* is that Dayah Samalanga was less structured and did not encourage student organizations or ethnic associations, while Dayah Darussalam was well structured and better organized. Here students were encouraged to form associations in order to practise leadership skills. She goes on, ‘At one point I was the head of the Student Association of Aceh Besar and at another point the head of our student dormitory.’ Teungku Rahimun left Dayah Darussalam (at the same time Ummi Hanisah did in 1996) after six years of study to assume a mission in her village on her own terms. Hanisah and Rahimun agreed to leave the *dayah* together in order to study at a regular university following the footsteps of Teungku Mawardi’s daughters, who studied at both Islamic boarding schools and regular university. This was against the common practice of the *dayah salafi* at the time when the *dayah* leaders forbade their students and children to study in a modern higher learning institution.

Women leading *dayah*

In 2001, Teungku Rahimun established Dayah Ar-Rahmah (named after herself, Rahimun, which means ‘compassionate’) in her father’s village of

Bineh Blang (Aceh Besar), on one and a half hectares of land donated by her family. With support from her community she built several *balees* (huts) as classrooms for students to study in. Her first students were seven village children sent by their parents to study how to read the Qur'an and the basic principles of religion. Initially, they studied in her house and, as more children and young adults from nearby villages attended her classes, Teungku Rahimum began to use the *balees* and provided boarding for some girls who wanted to pursue full-time study. Her pupils were both boys and girls; some were very young and others were more mature. Supported by her husband, who acted as both secretary and manager of the *dayah*, she enlisted male and female teachers who were willing to support her mission. Understanding her struggle, neighbouring communities and well-off parents gave their *zakat* (required charitable tax) and donations in a number of forms: some gave rice during the harvest, others sent money; and others provided building materials and foodstuffs. Her sincerity and perseverance, coupled by knowledge and commitment, made her a trusted figure in the community and she became a true *teungku* as she had aspired since childhood.

Dayah Ar-Rahmah has passed the government accreditation qualifications, though is ranked as grade C.¹¹ In addition to the *balees*, the *dayah* now possesses a building with ten classrooms donated by a Chinese shelter organization in the aftermath of the Tsunami in December 2004. The government of Aceh has also paid for the erection of a prayer hall in the complex and provided some other minor assistance, such as some books for its library. Within the complex, the Ar-Rahmah *dayah* accommodates more than 370 students of different ages, and is supported by 22 teachers (20 females and 2 males). Of its pupils, 60 per cent are female and the remainder is male; about fifty students are studying full-time and live on campus, while the rest either come for afternoon or evening classes. All boarding and non-boarding pupils are registered and must attend the classes regularly. Most non-boarding students also study in different schools or *madrrasah* in addition to attending religious instruction in the *dayah*, and a few are also students at various universities. Against the old tradition of the *dayah salafi*, Teungku Rahimum encourages her boarding students to study in regular schools if they are able to, for she herself completed her Bachelor's degree from a local Islamic university and registered for a Master's degree as an indication of her thirst for knowledge.

Teungku Rahimum is also active in local communities. She runs a number of religious instruction groups for women in different villages and is often invited to give public lectures by women's organizations. Though she has not yet been invited to give lectures to men's groups or co-ed groups in her own area, she has given public lectures to mixed audiences in East and North Aceh. She also teaches female and male university students in her *dayah*. Furthermore, Rahimum has attended a number of *dayah* meetings during which she would sometimes be the only female leader present. Teungku Rahimum reported initial 'strange looks' from her colleagues, as if she had entered the wrong place upon attending these meetings, but male colleagues

confirm that she astonished them with her ideas and knowledge. Teungku Rahimun herself acknowledged that eventually most of her male colleagues came to appreciate her contributions and recognize her as equal to them in bearing the same religious and social responsibilities. Some senior *ulama* such as Abu Daud Zamzami have also recognized her important role as a *dayah* leader and welcomed her involvement in the *ulama* organization, Consultative Council of the Ulama of Aceh. Not all male leaders are able to accept her leadership role: young male leaders in particular are not comfortable with her, but they are in a minority. She said, 'I overlook this kind of person and focus my attention instead on my work and students.'

In addition to teaching religious sciences, Ar-Rahmah *dayah* is also open to introducing new skills and contemporary needs. Teungku Rahimun has introduced her students to the dangers of drugs and intoxication, not only on religious grounds but also from the health viewpoint. She has welcomed discussions on reproductive health and taught her pupils the need to understand challenges facing young people. Moreover, her *dayah* has embraced peace education, which is important in the post-conflict era (for more on conflict in Aceh, see Srimulyani this volume). Teungku Rahimun also endorses women's active participation in social and political life. Quoting the Qur'anic and Biblical story of Queen Sheba's political leadership, she argues that 'The involvement of women in politics is necessary since women like their male counterparts are given the responsibility to bring benevolence [*rahmah*] and goodness [*kebaikan*] to others'. Many *hadith* (traditions concerning the words and acts of the Prophet Muhammad), she contends, are in support of women's social engagement and any dissenting views are in contradiction with the spirit of Islam and Prophetic practice. Here she referred to the widely reported recent controversy and debate over women's political leadership in Aceh that argued for the removal of a female subdistrict head (*camat*) from her position in Bireuen.¹² Her view on gender equality is shared by a sizable number of *ulama* in Aceh, but to have expressed it so eloquently is very unusual.

Like Teungku Rahimun, Ummi Hanisah founded Dayah Diniyyah Darusslam on a piece of land donated by a villager, during which time she was finishing her BA at a local Islamic college in her area. Together with a teaching assistant, she began operating classes for twenty boys and girls with a focus on reading the Qur'an and the basic principles of *tawhid* (oneness of God), *akhlak* (Islamic ethics) and *'ibadah* (active worship). She explained how 'In the beginning it was a kind of *balee beuet* in a small house without any written curriculum or structured system.' As more students joined the *balee*, eventually it transformed into a Taman Pendidikan Al-Qur'an (TPA, similar to Christian Sunday School). After two years of struggle, with a new building for classrooms on the donated land, her TPA further transformed into a full-time *dayah* named Diniyyah Darussalam, with over 50 boarding students in addition to a couple of dozen other young children who came for religious instruction.¹³ Her male students built their own *balees* for their living quarters out of donations they acquired from farmers at the time of harvests. In spite

of living in a war zone area, she managed to work productively and received a great deal of support from both communities as well as from GAM (Aceh Freedom Movement) leaders and the military (for more on GAM, see Srimulyani, this volume). By late 2003, her *Diniyyah* was accredited by the government with a B grade as more students and assistance arrived.

The *dayah* continued to grow both physically and academically. Some of the students who boarded at her *dayah* during the armed conflict were there for religious study, but also to avoid being accused of participation by either side in the conflict. As a woman, Ummi Hanisah was given leeway to do her work, since she could present herself as neutral with regard to the conflict. However, she often accepted young men who had been shot by the military and hosted them during their recovery before being sent to Jakarta or other areas of Indonesia to avoid military detention. Thus, the number of her students continued to increase. Working in the conflict zone, Ummi Hanisah often walked a very fine line in order to survive as she helped her students. When the Tsunami occurred in 2004, her *dayah* became a shelter for victims. As a result, she received assistance from some donors in the form of training. National and international non-governmental organizations such as the Indonesian Labor Union (Aspek Indonesia), Sask Finland and the United Nations Development Programme provided her *dayah* with a new building for living quarters and classrooms for both boys and girls. Offices for the school principal and teachers were also constructed, and teaching instruments and study materials were acquired. In addition to physical development, the *dayah* also improved academically. The peace education curriculum was introduced in 2004, and teaching on human rights and gender equality shortly thereafter. Computer skills and language training were also injected into the existing study plan. However, the real breakthrough for the *dayah* was the adoption of the *madrrasah* system as a twin to the *dayah*, allowing students to pursue both religious and secular schooling.

All of this would have been a source of celebration for the future growth of the *Dayah Diniyyah Darussalam* and for Ummi Hanisah as its leader, but fate had a different plan. As already mentioned, the *Diniyyah dayah* became a shelter for young boys and girls during the conflict and in the aftermath of the Tsunami, and, in an addition to this effort, in 2006 Ummi Hanisah created a Centre for domestically abused women and girls, and extended her *dayah* to serve as their shelter. For Ummi, taking care of the weak and providing assistance to the needy, whether males or females, was an integral part of her religious and social obligations, and many in the community supported her views and activities. Her *dayah* supported several victims of domestic violence and child abuse by providing a place for them to turn to at the time of urgent need. No protest was registered towards the *dayah* for its efforts to give shelter to women until two particular cases occurred. One was the case of a girl aged 14 who was accused of stealing and claimed to have been physically abused by her grandfather and uncle. The girl was badly hurt and Ummi Hanisah provided her with shelter and further assisted her in reporting the case to the authorities. The second case was that of a 17-year-old young woman

who was raped by her father. While pregnant, she was taken to Hanisah, who protected her and made her case known to the village leadership. By accepting the girl, she was also educating her community on the need to understand crimes of abuse of women and children. Unable to accept this discourse, some village leaders accused Ummi Hanisah of shaming the village. As a result she became a source of intrigue, intimidation and verbal abuse, and some villagers threatened to burn her house and *dayah*. In the heat of the conflict, efforts of mediation failed. Ummi Hanisah was unwilling to prolong the conflict and handed over her *dayah*, packed her bags and departed. Before leaving, she gave her students and teachers a choice of staying or following her to a new location.

The *teungku* moved to Meunasah Buloh, just 1 kilometre away, and was followed by her faithful teachers and students. They settled in a former Partai Aceh office and turned it into a new Centre. With the exception of the *dayah* name and a few loyal colleagues and pupils, Hanisah restarted from scratch. Support from the political establishment of Partai Aceh and local communities, as well as those who believed in her, aided Ummi Hanisah to pick up the pieces and begin developing her new *dayah* complex. She received financial support from the Bupati (district head), her community and the national electricity company to purchase 500 square metres of land for her new Centre. Ummi Hanisah also received four knock-down Tsunami barracks as living quarters for her students. It took her some time to regain momentum, and eventually more students and teachers returned to her and new ones joined, and, with a new two-storey building in the process of completion, the Diniyyah *dayah* slowly exhibited a new spirit of vibrancy. Currently (2012–) the *dayah* hosts over thirty-five boarding students (93 per cent female and 7 per cent male), with a few dozen pupils attending afternoon or night classes. Ummi Hanisah is supported by twelve teachers (ten female and two male), and continues to provide shelter for battered women and orphaned children. Aside from her *dayah* work, Hanisah leads women-only sermons in a number of villages and gives public lectures to other groups of women. Having since left politics to concentrate on her *dayah* work, she recently started the All West Aceh Ulama Forum and assumed its leadership and has become an adviser to the Aceh Barat Youth Association. The latter two groups function as venues where she has opportunities to give lectures to both males and females.

Conclusion

The experiences of Teungku Rahimun and Ummi Hanisah are similar and yet are different in their responses to the religious and social requirements of their respective societies. Power and authority are part of a negotiated process that takes place in a complex system of interactions between the *dayah* leaders, students and members of their families. Students are in need of actualizing themselves in order to progress, while *dayah* leaders are in need of students'

assistance and free services for the better management of their institutions. Unlike modern institutions, the *dayah* does not possess a well-structured bureaucracy, but instead operates on a fluid system which allows everyone willing to contribute. The experiences of Ummi Hanisah and Teungku Rahimun, both as students and leaders, also suggest that principles of gender complementarity in *dayah* may operate as a unifying factor bringing men and women together in the spirit of partnership, provided that they operate for the same dignified common aspirations and higher aims. Religion and spirituality are very powerful foundations for the knowledge process that unites male *dayah* leaders and their female students. Likewise, the women's efforts to claim human rights and to promote gender justice are manifested by their actions rather than mere discursive debates. The lives of these two female leaders highlight the importance of the force of personality and merit of persistence, which can effect unexpected changes in reality, even in a conservative *pesantren* culture and parochial family tradition. Finally, the *teungkus'* narratives reinforce the cherished conviction that religiosity and spirituality are basic needs which continue to flourish in urban and rural Acehnese communities.

Although women leaders and teachers are assuming more prominent roles in the male-dominated *dayah* system, their progress is very slow. It therefore makes sense to interpret the *dayah* world in a way that demonstrates the partnership between men and women, as in the case of Teungku Mawardi's leadership with his wife in their co-directing of Dayah Darussalam in Labuhan Haji. It must also be acknowledged that particular Acehnese histories and experiences shed light on understandings about gender cooperation and mutuality in religious education. The model of the Sultanahs of the past continues to resonate at a deep level in the psyches of people, as does the heroic activity of women in resistance against colonial oppression. This legacy deserves to be explored more deeply, and lessons drawn from it made to enliven and reimagine gender relations in the special arena of religious education.

Notes

- 1 Similar learning institutions have different names, including *pesantren* in Java and Kalimantan, as well as *surau* in West Sumatra, and *pondok* in other regions of Southeast Asia. In Aceh it is also called *rangkang* (hut).
- 2 Two factors may explain the widespread adoption of the name *pesantren* by Acehnese *ulama*: one religious and the other political. The recent process of Islamization of Indonesia centred on Java provided a religious factor leading to the Acehnese appreciation of vibrant *pesantren* culture and the adoption of this name. A second reason is that of the political grip during the Suharto regime, with its tendency to unify Indonesia's multiple cultures under the umbrella of Javanese symbols.
- 3 Four successive *ulama*-supported Sultanahs ruled over Aceh for fifty-nine consecutive years, during 1641–99 CE, constituting a unique record of female leadership in Aceh; al-Sinkili was Chief Mufti during the thirty-two-year reign of these Sultanahs.
- 4 *Madrasah* in Indonesia was initially a community and an *ulama*-supported school, but was later nationalized by the government to become the Islamic public school

administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, as opposed to *sekolah* run by the Ministry of National Education. *Dayah* or *pesantren* refer to community- or *ulama*-supported boarding schools. For the nature of traditional *madrasah* in central Islamic lands in earlier periods, consult the important work by George Makdisi (1981).

- 5 I have known Ummi Hanisah over the past seven years, as she was one of the *dayah* leaders who participated in my Ulama Peace Project since its introduction in 2003. The information for this account is drawn from my association with her, and from four lengthy telephone interviews conducted in December 2010 and January 2011.
- 6 It is a common practice in the *dayah* that students at advanced levels teach their juniors, and in this sense they are actually both students and teachers.
- 7 Waled Nu is an influential *ulama* in North Aceh and is currently the head of Nahdlatul Ulama (the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia) in the province. After leaving the all-female Islamic boarding school Dayah Puteri Muslimat to the care of his son Amrullah, he established yet another *dayah salafi*, Ummul Aiman, which was then exclusively for male students. This *dayah* has developed and now admits both boys and girls.
- 8 The singular of *ulama* is '*alim*'. Teungku may also be referred to as '*alim*'. It is not an ordination but is a title awarded on the basis of knowledge manifested both in one's character and in one's religious as well as social conduct, recognized by the community.
- 9 Abu M. Daud Zamzami is a highly respected and prominent *ulama* in Aceh. He founded and leads Dayah Riadhus Salihin in Aceh Besar, and is deputy head of the Consultative Council of the Ulama of Aceh (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama*). Previously, he was the head of the Association of Dayah Leadership (*Inshafuddin*) and member of several government advisory bodies, including the Advisory Committee to the Governor of Aceh.
- 10 The Naqshbandiyya Order, founded by the great Central Asian master Baha'al-Din Naqshband in the fourteenth century, represents a widespread Sufi fraternity known for preservation of a living esoteric practice.
- 11 The *dayah* was founded in 2001 and only passed the government accreditation standards in 2007. Some of the accreditation requirements involve boarding students, number of teachers and pupils, permanent classrooms and other facilities.
- 12 See the debates on female political leadership in the provincial newspaper *Serambi Indonesia* during the month of October 2010 by a number of authors, including: Ampuh Devayan's 'Ibu Camat' (10 October); Raihana Diani's 'Perempuan Tak Boleh Memimpin?' (13 October); Nurjannah Ismail's 'Pemimpin Perempuan' (16 October); and Ummi Shakira's 'Menyoal Tafsir Kontekstual: Catatan Untuk Nurjannah Ismail' (22 October).
- 13 Her *dayah* was named after two famous institutions she admires and wishes to emulate. The second part of the name was taken from the name of her learning centre in Labuhan Haji. The first part was taken from the Diniyyah Puteri, Padang Panjang, West Sumatra, a place she had an opportunity to visit in 1992 as a reward for being the best student in her class at the time.

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