



From Istanbul to Aceh: Strategic Transfers of Power, Technology, and Expertise in the 16th–17th Centuries

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Abstract: This study investigates the Ottoman Empire's substantial contribution to Acehnese development during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, emphasizing how strategic alliances, military expertise, and technological transfers enabled Aceh to resist Portuguese expansion and establish itself as a leading maritime power in Southeast Asia. Utilizing correspondence and historical records from both Acehnese and Ottoman sources, the research identifies key areas of collaboration, including the establishment of military academies, weapons production, and warship construction. In addition to military cooperation, the study underscores the Ottoman Empire's influence on Aceh's intellectual and governmental spheres through the involvement of Ottoman-trained scholars in the Aceh Sultanate, the adoption of administrative practices, and the enhancement of Aceh's political legitimacy as an Islamic sultanate. Employing a historical–analytical methodology, the study draws on primary sources such as *De Hikajat Atjeh*, *Adat Aceh*, *Hikayat Meukuta Alam*, Ottoman imperial archives, and European travel narratives. The findings demonstrate that the Ottoman Empire played a significant role in transforming Aceh into a prominent military and intellectual center. This partnership consolidated Aceh's maritime supremacy, reinforced its governmental structures, and protected its sovereignty. The Ottoman–Aceh alliance exemplifies broader patterns of cross-cultural exchange within the Islamic world and highlights the geopolitical significance of such strategic relationships.

Keywords: aceh; islamic geopolitics; military transfer; naval power; ottoman empire

Abstrak: Kajian ini meneliti kontribusi signifikan Kekaisaran Utsmani terhadap perkembangan Aceh pada abad ke-16 dan ke-17, dengan fokus pada bagaimana aliansi strategis, keahlian militer, dan transfer teknologi memungkinkan Aceh menghadapi ekspansi Portugis dan tampil sebagai kekuatan maritim dominan di Asia Tenggara. Dengan mengkaji korespondensi dan catatan sejarah dari sumber-sumber Aceh dan Utsmani, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi beberapa bidang kerja sama utama, termasuk pendirian akademi militer, produksi senjata, dan pembuatan kapal perang. Selain kerja

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sama militer, studi ini menyoroti pengaruh Kekaisaran Utsmani terhadap bidang intelektual dan pemerintahan Aceh melalui keterlibatan ulama terlatih Utsmani di Kerajaan Aceh Darussalam, adopsi praktik-praktik administrasi, serta penguatan legitimasi politik Aceh sebagai sebuah kesultanan Islam. Dengan menggunakan metodologi historis-analitis, penelitian ini memanfaatkan sumber-sumber primer seperti *De Hikajat Atjeh*, *Adat Aceh*, *Hikayat Meukuta Alam*, arsip Kekaisaran Utsmani, dan narasi perjalanan Eropa. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kekaisaran Utsmani memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk Aceh menjadi pusat militer dan intelektual yang kuat. Kemitraan ini memperkuat supremasi maritim Aceh, memperkokoh struktur pemerintahannya, dan menjaga kedaulatannya. Secara keseluruhan, aliansi Utsmani-Aceh mencerminkan pola pertukaran lintas budaya yang lebih luas dalam dunia Islam dan menunjukkan pentingnya hubungan strategis semacam ini dalam memengaruhi geopolitik kawasan.

Kata Kunci: aceh; geo-politik islam; kerajaan usmani; kekuatan armada laut; transfer militer

Introduction

The grandeur and greatness of the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam are often associated with the Ottoman Empire. In several Acehnese or Malay sources, many indications of Ottoman influence traditions were found in the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam, such as the traditions of the sultan's life, the palace, government structure, defense system, royal ceremonial and military parades, military leadership structure, recruitment and training of troops, and the transfer of technology in weaponry and shipbuilding. On the other hand, the Ottoman contributions, particularly in the military aspect, have helped the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam carry out its military activities.

Major transformations in the administrative and military systems of Aceh Darussalam began to emerge during the reign of Sultan Alauddin al-Kahar, when Ottoman assistance arrived through the deployment of weapons specialists, shipbuilders, and defense engineers. This transfer of expertise enabled Aceh to independently produce a wide range of weapons and warships. During the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda, Aceh produced thousands of cannons of varying sizes, representing a significant advancement in its military capabilities.

Sultan Alauddin Al-Kahar's letter suggests that, beyond requesting weapons and soldiers, he sought Ottoman instructors and experts in fortifications, weaponry, and shipbuilding. These experts trained Acehnese soldiers in horsemanship, cannon-making, and shipbuilding using local resources. Over time, Aceh developed its military production. Despite the fading diplomatic ties after 1580, due to the limited persistence in Aceh's military tactics, techniques, and artillery, largely because of the lasting impact of Ottoman instructors involved in the transfer of military knowledge (A. Reid, 1969a, p. 410). According to A. Hasjmy (1983, p. 183) noted that, in terms of military matters, the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam shared numerous similarities with the Ottoman Empire. According to Katib Celebi (1657) in his work 'Cihannuma,' as quoted by Göksoy, the Acehnese were formidable warriors who learned warfare techniques from the Turks. They utilized bows and arrows and were capable of constructing cannons

similar to those possessed by the Ottomans. (Feener, 2011, p. 80) This alliance rendered Aceh a powerful kingdom, influencing neighboring kingdoms and enticing them to establish friendly relations while simultaneously rejecting ties with the Portuguese.

While the Ottomans exerted considerable influence in parts of the Indonesian archipelago, this impact should be contextualized within broader regional dynamics. As the preeminent Islamic political power of the era, the Ottoman Empire was frequently regarded as the representative authority of the wider Muslim world (Burhanudin, 2016, p. 79). Nevertheless, Ottoman contributions, particularly in the military domain, should not overshadow the achievements of the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate, which attained significant internal development. Aceh enhanced its military system and established the capacity for large-scale weapons production.

This study employs the historical research method to reconstruct past events by systematically collecting, evaluating, and interpreting historical sources. The analysis of Ottoman involvement follows four steps: (1) Heuristics, which involves gathering primary and secondary sources such as *De Hikajat Atjeh*, *Hikayat Meukuta Alam*, *Adat Aceh*, European travel accounts, and modern studies; (2) Verification, which tests the authenticity and credibility of these sources through external and internal criticism; (3) Interpretation, which analyzes the verified data to elucidate the context and significance of Aceh–Ottoman interactions; and (4) Historiography, which constructs a coherent narrative explaining their political and religious connections within the broader context of Islamic and anti-colonial history. This approach provides a structured and critical framework for understanding the influence of inter-Islamic relations on Aceh and the broader Malay-Indonesian world.

Results and Discussion

The Ottoman-Acehnese Partnership: An Overview

The Ottoman Empire significantly shaped Aceh's political, military, and naval development, consolidating Aceh's status within the broader Islamic world. Ottoman support was substantive, enhancing Aceh's political legitimacy, strengthening governance, and transforming its military organization. Aceh's request for Ottoman assistance led to the arrival of skilled personnel, including artillery experts and shipbuilders, as well as the deployment of Ottoman officials and advisers who contributed to administrative improvements and the cultivation of local leadership. The Ottoman–Acehnese relationship demonstrates the interconnectedness of the Islamic world in resisting colonial encroachment and shows how polities such as Aceh engaged in global Islamic networks to secure political autonomy, military capacity, and spiritual legitimacy. This transregional alliance shaped Acehnese history and contributed to the broader narrative of Islamic resistance and identity formation in Southeast Asia (Reid, A. 1969).

The arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca heightened regional political tensions, resulting in conflicts between the Portuguese and several Islamic kingdoms, including Aceh Darussalam. In response, Aceh sought cooperation with external powers, most notably by establishing diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire to expel the Portuguese from the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait. A central motivation for this alliance was the lucrative spice trade, particularly the movement of pepper from sixteenth-century Aceh to the Red Sea, which both parties

aimed to protect. Simultaneously, Aceh expanded its commercial networks eastward, establishing relations with regions such as Bengal, Pegu, Arakan, Masulipatnam, and Nagapatnam (Subrahmanyam, 1988, p. 66). This network of cooperation also strengthened Aceh's military forces, which were reinforced not only by local troops but also by personnel from beyond the archipelago.

The Aceh Darussalam kingdom initially opposed the Portuguese. The emergence of Aceh as a kingdom in the early 16th century was based on four interrelated factors: military strength, politics, economy, and intellect. The conquest of Daya (1520), Pedir (1521), and Pasai (1524) not only demonstrated Aceh's military power but also made it an economic competitor of the Portuguese for three decades. Different from Pedir and Pasai, Aceh never entered into any cooperation with the Portuguese (Hadi, 2010, pp. 21–22). Xavier, a Catholic missionary from Navarre, Spain, who was in Malacca then, mentioned that Aceh was a kingdom at the western tip of Sumatra controlling many territories. The word "Aceh" frequently appeared in Portuguese records as an enemy of the Portuguese and Christianity (Henry James Coleridge, n.d., p. 409).

Recognizing the immense challenge of confronting Portuguese ships and artillery, Sultan Al-Kahar dispatched a delegation to Istanbul, the Ottoman capital, to request military support. The envoys carried valuable items and gifts as tokens of goodwill. In response, Sultan Suleiman Al-Kanuni sent a small fleet to aid the Aceh Sultanate. In 1564, this fleet engaged in battle with the Portuguese forces, but the confrontation ended with the Ottomans losing a ship and 500 Muslims being captured. Seeing the increasingly powerful position of the Portuguese, Al-Kahar immediately sent his envoy, named Husain, to Istanbul via the Yemen–Hijaz–Suez route to request Ottoman assistance, as the Ottomans themselves had fought several naval wars against the Portuguese and the Spaniards (the Iberians) in the Mediterranean. He brought with him gifts, valuables, and letters requesting a more substantial Ottoman intervention—including warships, military experts, shipbuilders, and fortifications (Hisar). (Mudurlugu, 1998b, p. xix)

The purpose of this letter is to seek military support from the Ottoman Sultan. Al-Kahar directed his plea to Al-Kanuni. The applications presented in the letter encompass various requests, including the acquisition of Ottoman territories, assistance with cannons, troops, and the expertise of military experts (Şah, 1967b, p. 385). After the death of Al-Kanuni, Sultan Selim II responded to the letter by fulfilling the requests for weaponry.

Key Contribution of The Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman contribution to Aceh particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries provided military assistance, transfer of military technology including weapon manufacturing, naval architecture and warship construction, to help Aceh defend itself against Portuguese colonial expansion in Southeast Asia. The Ottomans sent scholars and skilled forces. This support helped Aceh maintain its sovereignty for a considerable period, with the Ottoman influence shaping its political and religious landscape.

The presence of Turks in the Aceh Sultanate was recorded by several eyewitnesses. *De Hikajat Atjeh* mentions that when Sultan al-Mukamil (Syah Alam) launched an attack on Johor, Ottoman troops were involved in the operation. Among the most prominent was Asad Chan (Tobji Rumi), an artillery specialist (Iskandar, 1958a, p. 181). *De Hikajat Atjeh* also records the presence of a *Syarif Muluk* named Pirus Chan, who was likely also of Rumi (Ottoman) origin (Iskandar, 1958b, p. 182).

During the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda, when Aceh–Ottoman relations were renewed, Iskandar Muda sent an embassy to Istanbul, and on their return journey the delegation brought cannons and several troops. Information about the presence of Turks in Aceh was also reported by Thomas Best, who visited Aceh in April 1613; he personally saw several Turks who lived and worked in the kingdom.(Best, 1934, p. 159) Hamka further affirms this by mentioning several Turks who held important positions in the Aceh administration, such as Major Tholib, Khoja Hamid, Khoja Nasir, and Khoja Rahasia(Hamka, 1994, p. 151).

Available testimonies demonstrate that the military, technological, and professional contributions of the Turks (Ottomans) were consistent and constituted a fundamental pillar reinforcing Aceh's power structure. Consequently, their presence serves as a significant supporting force in consolidating Aceh's authority.

Government Structure and Defense System

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the governmental and defensive structures of the Aceh Sultanate experienced substantial development, especially as Aceh forged strong ties with the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman influence is evident in Aceh's administrative system, palace security, fortifications, and ceremonial practices characterized by military attributes.

The governance system of the Aceh Sultanate in the 16th and 17th centuries shared numerous features with the Ottoman Empire. In the Ottoman context, the Sultan presided over a hierarchy in which each major province was led by a beylerbey, followed by sancak bey and alay bey or subashi (Stanford J. Shaw, 1976, pp. 125–126). Aceh adopted a comparable tiered structure. According to Mukti Ali, the smallest administrative unit was the kawom (qaum), which combined to form a gampong, then a mukim, all under the authority of the hulubalang. Three principal hulubalang groups formed the sagi, a confederacy directly controlled by the Sultan. This administrative arrangement became more consolidated under Sultan Iskandar Muda (Mukti Ali, 1970, p. 9). However, the persistence of pre-existing administrative traditions in Aceh indicates that Ottoman influence was partial, selective, and subject to negotiation, rather than representing a complete structural transformation.

At the central level, the Sultan of Aceh was supported by four principal Hulubalang, several commanders, and senior officials (kajurang). The Hulubalang fulfilled dual roles as both military leaders and administrative chiefs of their respective territories, serving as regional rulers, army leaders, district heads, and local police authorities (dubalang). Although these positions were hereditary, they required confirmation by the Sultan through a sarakata (Islail Sofyan (Ed), 1997, p. 137).

Like the Ottoman Sultan, the Acehnese Sultan wore luxurious royal robes and was protected by strict security. He had layers of guards, including personal bodyguards, *sepoy* troops from the Coromandel Coast (as noted by Marsden), as well as armed eunuchs and slaves who guarded palace gates (Marsden, n.d., p. 316).

In the field of defense, major developments in Aceh's physical defensive structures can be traced from the 16th to the 17th centuries. Early Acehnese fortifications were simple bamboo and earth structures, as noted in the *Roteiro*. Beaulieu, who visited Aceh in 1619, also noted the absence of solid city walls, with defenses relying instead on deep trenches surrounded by dense bamboo(Pierre-Yves

Manguin, 2011, p. 68). If this were accurate, then at that time the fortifications of Aceh Darussalam would not yet have been constructed, because the Hikayat Meukuta Alam states the opposite.

The *Hikayat Meukuta Alam* gives mentions that under Iskandar Muda a major fort was built by twelve experts from Turkey. The fort was said to be as tall as a coconut tree, plastered with lime to give it a white appearance, built in two levels with four large towers. Construction took two years and was intended to repel naval attacks. Large-scale fort-building became more prominent when Aceh faced growing threats from the Portuguese and strengthened its technological links with the Ottomans. Before this period, under Sultan Al-Kahar, Aceh's military focus was mainly offensive—producing cannons and warships to attack Malacca (Abdullah, 1991, pp. 130–132). The account in this hikayat was likely recorded during the later period of Sultan Iskandar Muda's reign, after 1619 CE.

Aceh's royal traditions also adopted Ottoman-style military parades and ceremonies. Various state rituals were imbued with military elements. Acehnese custom records that during Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and the Prophet's Birthday celebrations, Sultan Iskandar Muda would travel to the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque accompanied by an impressive military procession. *Hulubalang*, *bentara*, *tandil*, and soldiers carried full weaponry, drums were beaten, and the royal banners were raised (Lamnyong, 1958, pp. 28–33).

Military Academy Establishment

The letter from Alauddin Al-Kahar explains that in the initial request (1562), Aceh asked for trained soldiers skilled in weapons and horseback riding. Sultan Suleiman Al-Kanuni then sent Lutfi as an envoy accompanied by several artillery and horse experts needed by Aceh. However, some requests, such as weapons and cannons, were not granted for various reasons. Sultan Alauddin mentioned that the eight artillery experts who were sent had arrived safely in Aceh. He also requested horse trainers and skilled personnel from the Ottoman Sultan to help build fortresses. (Şah, 1967a, p. 388) The Ottomans only sent troops once. Afterward, skilled personnel such as cannon and weapon makers, fortress builders, warship builders, strategy experts, and horse trainers played a significant role in the development of the military of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam in subsequent periods. (Hasjmy, 1983b, p. 134)

The Ottomans' presence in Aceh Darussalam enhanced the military strategy of Acehnese forces, notably through the establishment of Mahad Baitul Maqdis, a military academy in Bitai Village. Bitai, home to Sultan Ali Riayat Syah's tomb, served as the academy's center with Turkish instructors training both men and women. One prominent graduate was Admiral Malahayati, a noblewoman who held a key military role under Sultan al-Mukamil (1586-1604). Coming from a lineage of admirals, she was entrusted with welcoming Sir James Lancaster, Queen Elizabeth I's envoy (Hasjmy, 1983b, p. 127).

Bitai Village was home to 300 Ottoman military experts who came to Aceh during the reign of Sultan Suleiman Al-Kanuni. Bitai Village was located near the capital city of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam and is always remembered as the place where Ottoman people settled in Aceh (Horgronje, 1906, p. 209). Some trainers sent by the Ottomans, originally from Syria, resided in Bitai, a village close to the Aceh palace. It is also in this place that the burial site of a prominent Syrian scholar, known as Teungku Bitai, was discovered (Said, 1981a, p. 182). There were 100 Turks intentionally training the Acehnese forces, both the army and the navy. Malahayati also married a young officer later assigned by

Sultan al-Mukamil as an admiral to lead the Acehese fleet in the Malacca Strait (Solichin, 1995, pp. xiii–xiv).

Malahayati's outstanding achievements in the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam were evidenced by her close relationship with Sultan al-Mukamil, and the Sultan himself had great trust in her. According to John Davis's records, during the reign of Sultan Alauddin al-Mukamil, he chose a woman as his admiral. John Davis stated, 'A woman is his admiral, for hee will trust no men' (Davis, 1880a, p. 150).

This close relationship between Malahayati and the Sultan, according to Elsa Clavé-Çelik, was possibly due to her neutral nature among the people surrounding the Sultan. (Clavé, 2014, p. 278) Malahayati was also entrusted to lead *the inong balee*, the widows of the Acehese mujahids who had fallen in the struggle against the Portuguese. Among the significant contributions of this female force which reached 2,000 was their support for Iskandar Muda to succeed as the Sultan (Hasjmy, 1983b, p. 127).

The tradition of women in the military, even reaching the highest military positions, appears to have unique characteristics that are very different from the Ottoman Empire. According to Beaulieu, during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda, there were 3,000 women with various tasks, including military duties. There were so many women in the palace that they had their own lives, such as engaging in trade under the supervision of captains (Harris, n.d, p. 745).

Aceh Darussalam employed three troop recruitment models: local enlistment, captured prisoners, and hired mercenaries. Lombard notes that Aceh could mobilize up to 40,000 men from surrounding areas. During wartime, the Sultan incurred no expenses as troops supplied their own provisions for three months (Lombard, 1991a, p. 119).

Next, the troops are obtained from prisoners of war. Beaulieu mentions that when Sultan Iskandar Muda conquered Kedah, he brought 7,000 prisoners to Aceh (A. Reid, 1969b, p. 411). Some of them were foreign soldiers brought to Aceh at a young age. They held various positions, including as gatekeepers. Beaulieu states that the Aceh palace has two gates, the outer and inner gates, each guarded by 150 foreign guards. They lived in the palace, learned to use weapons and firearms, and obeyed the Sultan. (Harris, n.d., p. 745) Reid mentions that the palace guards managed by Iskandar Muda (1607–1636) were like the Janissary troops of the Ottomans. The Janissaries were slave soldiers captured from enemies when they were young and trained rigorously in warfare (A. Reid, 1969b, p. 411).

Lastly, Aceh also employed mercenaries from various regions. According to Pinto, besides the Acehese population, the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam also had mercenaries from several regions, such as Turks, Abyssinians, Malabars, Luzons, and Borneo. (Pinto, 1891a, p. 62) In Beaulieu's records, there were also Indian soldiers known for their exceptional bravery and reputation, and they never caused any harm to the Sultan (Harris, n.d, p. 745). From the explanations above, the tradition of troop recruitment was more structural in nature than a direct imitation. In other words, the recruitment system resembled broader Southeast Asian models.

A unique aspect that may differ from the Ottomans is that the Acehese military had a palace guard division called the Keumala Cahya Division (honor guard battalion), and its soldiers and commanders consisted of women. These women were slender and beautiful. They were also responsible for welcoming honorable guests who came to Aceh Darussalam. (Hasjmy, 1983b, p. 127) During the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda, 3,000 women served as guards or had other palace duties. They were divided

into several groups, each led by a captain.(Harris, n.d, p. 745) Such a military force and guard system does not seem to be found within the Ottoman Empire.

The Acehnese forces were reinforced with mounted units. In addition to horses, Aceh had many elephants used for warfare. Davis mentioned that elephants were the trusted mounts of the king's confidants (Davis, 1880a, p. 150). According to Lombard, the strength of Aceh on land was in its elephants. Their war elephants were their true power, and according to Davis, the strength of the Acehnese land forces also relied on these elephants. The elephants were trained to become accustomed to gunfire, so they were no longer afraid when they heard it, including being unafraid of fire by getting used to burning straw tied to the tips of spears near them (Lombard, 1991a, pp. 116–117).

The Ottoman Empire played a decisive role in strengthening the intellectual and military foundations of Aceh Darussalam through the establishment and development of military academies and dayah-based educational institutions. Ottoman military experts sent during the reign of Sultan Suleiman al-Kanuni contributed not only to battlefield tactics and weaponry but also to institutionalized military training, most notably through the formation of *Mahad Baitul Maqdis* in Bitai Village. This academy functioned as a structured training center where Turkish instructors—skilled in artillery, naval warfare, fortress construction, and cavalry tactics—educated Acehnese recruits, including elite female units such as those led by Admiral Malahayati. In addition to military training, Ottoman influence extended to religious and intellectual spheres, as several scholars from the Ottoman domains, including Syria. Therefore, Aceh adopted tactical knowledge while expanding distinct local innovations in some cases such as female unit forces and women leadership like Malayahati.

Weapon Manufacturing

John Davis records that the weapons of Aceh Darussalam were originally considered superficial, including bows, arrows, spears, swords, and weapons without carriages (Davis, 1880a, p. 150). Sousa also mentions that their primary weapon being poisoned arrows. He also added that the Acehnese forces also began to use firearms and Portuguese cannons captured during the conquest of Pasai (Sousa, 1695, p. 242). In Southeast Asia, particularly in the Malay region, the use of firearms was first introduced by Albuquerque during the attack on Malacca in 1511. Aceh started using firearms and cannons after successfully conquering Pidie and Pasai in the 1520s when they seized Portuguese weaponry in those areas (Takeshi, 1984, p. 47). Thus, Aceh's armament increased from traditional weapons to firearms and cannons. In other words, even before its diplomacy with the Ottomans, Aceh had already used firearms and cannons captured during its wars with Pedir and Pasai, which had been assisted by the Portuguese. However, after the arrival of the Ottoman help, Aceh was able to produce firearms in large quantities. In total, Aceh possessed approximately eight thousand cannons of various sizes.

By the mid-1560s, cannons were widely used in South Asia, marking a military revolution. Aceh sought military aid from the Ottomans and Gujarat, acquiring two cannons, *Chingiz Khan* and *I'timad Khan*. Guillot and Kalus suggest these cannons arrived in Aceh in 1567 with Chingiz Khan's help and were intended for Aceh's attack on Malacca in early 1568 (Guillot & Kalus, 2006, p. 89).

In the letter from Sultan Alauddin al-Kahar to the Ottoman Empire, there was a request for the dispatch of weapons and skilled weapons craftsmen to train Acehnese local forces manufacturing weapons (Abdullah, 1991a, p. 132). Sultan Al-Kahar requested the help of experts who could produce

weapons, warships, war strategies, and so on so that Aceh could eventually become self-sufficient in weapon production (Hasjmy, 1983b, p. 134). Pinto, who believed that the first Ottoman assistance occurred in 1539 before Aceh officially requested aid from Istanbul in 1562, mentioned that to assist Aceh in fighting against the Batak people, 300 Turks were sent through Mecca (Red Sea), and the Sultan of Aceh himself sent four ships loaded with pepper to the Ottomans (Pinto, 1891a, p. 32).

Ar-Raniri accounted that Ottoman envoys arrived in Aceh to manufacture cannons and firearms (al-Raniri, 1966, pp. 31–32). In his letter, Al-Kahar wrote to Al-Kanuni that Husain (Al-Kahar's envoy) departed for Istanbul and was received by Sultan al-Kanuni, that then sent military experts to produce cannons and teach the Acehnese forces (Şah, 1967b, p. 383). Al-Kahar also asked for cannon, as he states, "We request Your Highness to provide us with the cannons Bacaluşka, Havayi, and Syaikha" (Şah, 1967b, p. 389). In addition, Al-Kahar also requested some experts to build fortresses, cannons, and warships. After the death of Al-Kanuni, his son; Sultan Salim II sent 15 ships to Aceh, but due to the rebellion in Yemen, the ships was redirected there. Some records indicate that several ships carrying experts arrived in Aceh, including weaponry (Mudurlugu, 1998, p. 130; Şah, 1967a, p. 390).

The Hikayat Meukuta Alam provides detailed accounts of collaborative efforts between Ottoman and Acehnese craftsmen, initiated under the directive of Sultan Iskandar Muda, to produce weapons and artillery. This cooperation extended beyond military hardware to encompass the construction of fortifications, palaces, and other essential infrastructure. The *Hikayat Meukuta Alam* documents this initiative, stating, "Ketika itu disuruh pahlawan, beserta angkatan disuruh bina..." ("At that time, warriors were ordered, along with the forces, to build...") (Abdullah, 1991a, pp. 130–132).

Within Acehnese society, Ottoman envoys were highly esteemed and referred to as pahlawan (heroes). According to Imran T. Abdullah, pahlawan denotes the Ottomans, whereas angkatan refers to Acehnese military personnel (Abdullah, 1991a, p. 13). Iskandar Muda's diplomatic engagement with the Ottoman Empire sought to establish military alliances. The Sultan sent Nyak Dum to lead a fleet of three vessels to Istanbul, where an audience with the Ottoman Sultan was obtained. In response, the Ottoman Sultan provided the Acehnese with a cannon, later named Lada Secupak, and assigned 12 experienced Ottoman specialists to assist in its manufacture. As recorded, "On an auspicious day, the three Acehnese ships departed from the land of Rum, bound for the island of Aceh, carrying the twelve warriors and the cannon. After three months without incident, the delegation arrived safely in Aceh and anchored in the bay" (Hasjmy, 1983a, p. 101; Sabil, 1931, p. 7; Said, 1981b, p. 183).

With Ottoman assistance, Aceh successfully established a local weapons industry, marking a significant leap in its military capacity. Ottoman military advisors, along with access to transregional knowledge and technology, enabled Aceh to produce cannons, firearms, and warships on an unprecedented scale. The weapons produced were diverse. *The Hikayat Meukuta Alam* mentions that the Ottoman experts and Acehnese warriors worked together to produce cannons and other weapons as the following text,

Konon ceritanya kurang atau lebih tak jelas amat, hanya dilihat kira-kira

Meriam dituang banyak sekali, baik yang besi maupun tembaga

Meriam dituang berbagai ukuran, berurutan bagai adik-kakak (Abdullah, 1991b, pp. 130–132)

(The story is unclear, only seen roughly.

Cannons were cast in large quantities, both in iron and copper

Cannons were cast in various sizes and arranged like siblings)

Historical accounts indicate that firearms production in Aceh Darussalam was extensive, encompassing a wide range of cannon sizes. John Davis documented the presence of skilled weapon makers in Aceh, a claim supported by Beaulieu, who noted that segments of the Acehnese population possessed expertise in artillery casting. The availability of essential raw materials, such as iron and copper, facilitated local weapons manufacturing, which dates back to the early period of the Aceh Sultanate. Historical records, including the late sixteenth-century Roteiro of Aceh analyzed by Pierre-Yves Manguin, document the existence of iron-processing facilities alongside religious and administrative structures (Harris, n.d., p. 745).

Snouck Hurgronje's ethnographic observations highlight the existence of gampong pande, or blacksmith villages, within the Aceh Sultanate, demonstrating a well-established tradition of metallurgy and weapon production. Villages such as gampong Jawa, Peunayong, Lam Bhu', Lueng Bata, Lam Seupeueng, Ateueng, Batoh, and Meura'sa served as specialized centers for forging a diverse array of weaponry (Horgronje, 1906, p. 24).

The Hikayat Meukuta Alam provides detailed accounts of artillery production in the Aceh Sultanate, stating that "a considerable number of cannons were cast, both in iron and copper." This reference underscores the extensive metallurgical capabilities within the region, where iron and copper were primary resources for weapon manufacturing. The diversity in cannon sizes, ranging from small to large, reflects a structured production system: "Cannons were cast in various sizes, arranged like siblings" (Abdullah, 1991a, p. 132).

A notable example is the Lada Secupak cannon, an Ottoman gift to the Aceh Sultanate that became emblematic of the military alliance between the two powers. Although this cannon sustained structural damage during a civil conflict in the 1720s, it was later transported to the Netherlands in 1873 as a historical artifact. Measuring 4.6 meters in length, the Lada Secupak symbolized prestige and power, though its size was modest compared to other Ottoman-style artillery produced in Aceh (A. Reid, 2014a, p. 258). Cannon was called Lela, which represents a distinctive category of small cannons among various artillery types. The terms meriam (cannon) and lela are believed to have etymological roots in Arabic, derived from the female names Maryam and Laila (A. Reid, 2014b, p. 257). Another type of cannon was Rentaka. it is an artillery piece with a barrel that can be directed in multiple directions. The rentaka emerged as one of the most prevalent and efficient artillery pieces in the Nusantara region.

Beyond artillery production, experts from the Ottoman Empire, in collaboration with Acehnese forces, also manufactured firearms, including muskets. These handheld firearms were identified as ispinggar or istinggar and were also referred to as senapang and topak. The istinggar represents an early form of musket, notable for producing a sharp, cracking sound likened to roasting beans (Ismail, 2012, p. 123).

In addition to weapon manufacturing, Aceh developed ammunition and explosive devices, including grenades. The Hikayat Meukuta Alam describes: "Devices for hurling Bruek Kara (grenades) and the fierce anak kadinah (bullets) were abundant and filled the land. Black cumin-like gunpowder was stored in large quantities, sufficient to fill half a gunca." Bruek Kara refers to a type of grenade, while

Anak Kadinah denotes bullets. The reference to "black cumin gunpowder" underscores the extensive production and storage of gunpowder in Aceh.

The Ottoman military contribution to Aceh significantly strengthened the sultanate's defense against Portuguese threats and advanced its military institutions, including the Baitul Maqdis Academy. This support enhanced Aceh's strategic position in Southeast Asia and localized Ottoman military practices, resulting in a unique synthesis that included prominent roles for women. The alliance demonstrates how transregional Islamic networks shaped local power and identity.

Naval Architecture & Warship Construction

Most rulers in the Indian Ocean region demonstrated limited engagement with maritime trade and naval warfare, which facilitated foreign dominance. In contrast, the Portuguese prioritized naval development to achieve commercial, economic, and military objectives. Their success resulted from advanced shipbuilding, the integration of artillery with heavily armed vessels, and effective tactical organization. This naval superiority enabled Portuguese expansion in Asia, where maritime dominance was essential—a strategic understanding largely absent among Asian states (Gabriel & Metz, 1992, p. 88).

John Davis notes that, alongside goldsmiths and weaponsmiths, the Aceh Sultanate possessed skilled shipbuilders. Beaulieu also observed that Acehnese artisans, proficient in working with iron, copper, wood, and gold, demonstrated expertise in constructing galleys (Harris, n.d., p. 745). During the reign of Sultan Alauddin al-Kahar, Aceh conducted its largest naval assault on Malacca in 1568, deploying around 300 ships of various sizes. Portuguese chronicler Diogo do Couto reported a total of 346 vessels (Manguin, 1988, pp. 619–620). John Davis estimated that the Aceh Sultanate maintained a significant fleet, including approximately 100 galleys (Davis, 1880b, p. 150).

Beaulieu commented on Aceh's naval dominance, observing that the Sultan's maritime power exceeded that of neighboring states. The fleet included 100 well-constructed galleys, with one-third surpassing the size of contemporary European ships. Beaulieu documented a 120-foot-long galley, praising its craftsmanship (Harris, n.d., p. 745). Thomas Best, who met Iskandar Muda in 1613, described the Acehnese fleet as heavily armed, with galleys and frigates equipped with cannons, culverins, and other advanced artillery (Best, 1934, p. 213).

In 1629, Iskandar Muda led a major military campaign against Malacca, mobilizing 20,000 troops transported by a fleet of 236 ships (Danver, 1992, p. 228; Hasjmy, 1983a, p. 137). The expedition was commanded by Orang Kaya Laksamana and Orang Kaya Setia Lila. The conflict was characterized as intense and prolonged. Four months after Iskandar Muda's death, Peter Mundy reported that Aceh's naval strength included approximately 200 galleys and warships (Mundy, 1919, p. 122).

Documentation of the vessel types used by the Aceh Sultanate, especially in military contexts, appears in both Portuguese and Malay sources, including works by Pinto and Couto, as well as indigenous texts such as *De Hikajat Atjeh* and *The Hikayat Meukuta Alam*. These records reveal inconsistencies in ship classifications, likely due to linguistic differences in describing similar vessel designs. Pinto mentions vessels such as *lanchares* (oared ships), *galiots*, and *galabuzes* of *Jaoa* during Aceh's expedition against *Aru* (Pinto, 1891b, p. 62). Couto lists a variety of ship types, including *galai*

(galleys), fusta, galeot, lanchara, balang, and sampan, indicating a broad and complex naval fleet (Manguin, 1988, pp. 619–620).

Beaulieu's account of his visit to Aceh notes the presence of 100 galleys and 600 junks (jong/jung), underscoring Aceh's significant maritime capabilities (Prakash, 2012, p. 612). Eredia also catalogued local Malay vessels, including baloes (balang), lanchara, and bantis (banting), highlighting the diversity of ship designs in the region (Eredia et al., 1997, p. 36). De Hikajat Atjeh records that various vessels navigated Aceh's rivers, such as ghorab, fusta, pilang, banting, jongkong, dadap, kelulus, and pencalang (Iskandar, 1958a, p. 130). For military purposes, ghorab, fusta, sumbuk, pilang, dendang, and banting were the primary warships (Iskandar, 1958a, p. 175).

Among the vessels described, the ghorab (also known as ghurab) stands out, reflecting substantial external influence on Aceh's naval architecture. The ghorab served as a warship powered by both sails and oars and was a critical asset in both Islamic and Christian fleets. It was generally smaller than the three-masted Portuguese carracks and typically featured two masts positioned toward the bow. The term ghorab means "black crow," possibly referencing the ship's dark color or swift maneuverability (Agius, 2014, pp. 348–351).

In 1552, Ottoman admiral Sidi Reis recorded that the Portuguese naval presence in the Indian Ocean included four carracks, three ghorab (large oared warships), and twelve smaller galiots (Agius, 2014, p. 350; Reis, 1899, p. 10).

Portuguese and European sources often equate the ghorab with the galley, derived from the Portuguese term galé. Aceh's adoption of the term ghorab reflects Arabic-Persian linguistic influence, differing from the Ottoman term kadirga, which referred to a similar class of war galley. While the Ottomans used the kadirga as a standard warship, Aceh's ghorab vessels were equipped with heavy artillery, demonstrating the combined influence of Ottoman naval technology and Acehnese shipbuilding. This hybrid design made Aceh's ghorab analogous to the Ottoman kadirga, highlighting extensive maritime collaboration and technological exchange between Aceh and the Ottoman Empire (Couto et al., 2014, p. 90).

Manguin identifies differences in terminology between Aceh and the broader Malay world regarding galley-type ships. Aceh used the term ghorab, while the Malays used ghali. Manguin suggests that both terms have foreign origins, indicating that these vessels were introduced to Aceh after the 1530s. Before this period, indigenous ships dominated regional maritime activities. After 1530, the number of galley-type ships increased, coinciding with advancements in artillery, ship size, and firepower (Wade et al., 2012, p. 63). By the 1560s and 1580s, Aceh possessed about 300 elongated vessels, including medium-sized fusta and 50 galleys. These ships reflected Mediterranean influences, attributed to skills acquired from defecting Portuguese sailors and Ottoman shipbuilders (Manguin, 1993, p. 206).

De Hikajat Atjeh references the ghorab 36 times, making it the most frequently mentioned vessel in Aceh's naval records. During Iskandar Muda's rule, Aceh launched a major offensive against Malacca in 1629, deploying 250 ships, 20,000 soldiers, and significant artillery. Of these vessels, 47 were notably large, with some nearly 100 feet in length (Danver, 1992, p. 229). Reports describe an unprecedented vessel, unmatched in the Christian world, measuring 100 meters long and 17 meters wide. This three-masted ship, equipped with 37 oars, carried 700 soldiers and extensive artillery. Known as Cakradonya

(Cakra Dunia), it was also called *Espanto do Mundo* or "The Terror of the World" (Danver, 1992, p. 233; Manguin, 1993, p. 208; Wade et al., 2012, pp. 163–165).

Although Portuguese influence was present, Ottoman expertise played a decisive role in shaping Aceh's warship construction. Sultan Alauddin al-Kahar's request for Ottoman shipbuilders and engineers resulted in the production of larger warships, such as the *Ghorab* and *Fusta*, which became central to Aceh's navy. De Hikajat Atjeh identifies these vessels as Aceh's primary warships. Prior to Ottoman involvement, Aceh's fleet primarily consisted of *Lanchara*, *Galiot*, and *Calabuza* ships. By 1568, after the Aceh-Ottoman alliance, galley-type ships like the *Galai* appeared alongside traditional vessels, marking a significant shift in Aceh's naval capabilities.

C.R. Boxer notes that Portuguese shipbuilding techniques influenced Acehnese naval design, particularly through 16th-century contact and conflict. However, the structural and strategic transformation of Aceh's warfleet was more significantly shaped by Ottoman maritime expertise (Boxer, 1969, pp. 427–428). This is supported by a letter from Sultan Al-Kahar requesting Ottoman assistance, specifically asking for "several horse trainers, fortress engineers, and galley shipbuilders" to strengthen Aceh's military infrastructure (Şah, 1967b, p. 388). The request for Ottoman specialists highlights a deliberate shift toward adopting Ottoman naval doctrines rather than Portuguese models.

The transformation in Aceh's naval composition is evident in indigenous chronicles such as *De Hikajat Atjeh*, which consistently lists the *Ghorab* and *Fusta* as central elements of the Sultanate's navy. These warships, prioritized over other vessel types, were specifically designed for combat, in contrast to smaller transport ships used mainly for logistics. According to Guilmartin's classification, the *Fusta*—with 10–15 oar ports per side—ranks just below the *Galiot* in size, while *Bergantines*, with a single-rower configuration, are the smallest and least militarized (Guilmartin, 2002, pp. 113–114). The inclusion of these vessels in Aceh's fleet demonstrates a deliberate, tactical evolution toward galley-style warfare influenced by Ottoman design.

Before the mid-16th century, Aceh's naval assets were considerably less specialized. Pinto's account of the 1538 assault on Portuguese-held Malacca describes fleets composed of *Lanchara*, *Galiot*, and *Calabuza* vessels, accompanied by cargo ships for provisioning, but does not mention *Ghorab* or *Galai* warships (Pinto, 1891b, p. 62). This absence suggests that advanced warship types had not yet been adopted by Aceh. Tome Pires also notes that earlier expeditions, such as Pate Unus's 1513 campaign against Malacca, relied on Chinese-style *Junk* ships (Pires, 2005, p. 151), further indicating that pre-1560s naval warfare in the archipelago lacked dedicated warships and was subordinate to land campaigns.

A significant turning point occurred after 1562, following the formalization of Aceh's alliance with the Ottoman Empire. The renewed attack on Malacca in 1568 exemplified this transformation. According to Manguin, Aceh's fleet now included *Galai*, *Fusta*, and *Galiot* vessels alongside older types such as *Lanchara*, *Balang*, and *Sampan* (Manguin, 1988, pp. 619–620). Sousa confirms this shift, noting that the Acehnese navy deployed up to 20 *Galai* during the campaign (Sousa, 1695b, p. 272). These developments indicate that the *Galai*, an Ottoman-style war galley, entered Acehnese service as a direct result of this geopolitical partnership.

In addition to advancements in naval architecture and construction, the Ottoman Empire provided comprehensive institutional support to the Aceh Sultanate, particularly in developing governmental and

military frameworks. This support included the deployment of Khoja/Mayor, Ottoman-trained administrators, advisers, and instructors, who contributed to strengthening Aceh's bureaucracy, improving record-keeping, and refining palace administration. Their involvement fostered a more structured governmental hierarchy and facilitated Aceh's integration into broader models of Islamic governance inspired by Ottoman administrative norms.

Conclusion

The Ottoman Empire significantly influenced the political, military, and naval development of the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate during the 16th and 17th centuries. Ottoman support enhanced Aceh's resistance to Portuguese expansion and elevated the kingdom's status within the wider Islamic world. As a result of this alliance, Aceh achieved increased political legitimacy, more organized governance, and a restructured and fortified military system.

Aceh's appeal for Ottoman assistance led to the deployment of skilled personnel, including artillery specialists, shipbuilders, and a Khoja/Mayor, an Ottoman official and adviser. These individuals contributed to administrative improvements and the development of local leadership. The collaboration enabled the transfer of military expertise, shipbuilding methods, and strategic knowledge, culminating in the construction of advanced warships such as the Ghorab and Fusta, which integrated Ottoman maritime designs with Acehnese craftsmanship.

Ottoman involvement enabled Aceh to expand its naval capabilities, effectively contesting Portuguese influence and asserting control over key trade routes in the Indian Ocean. This partnership exemplifies a broader trend of cross-cultural military exchange within the Islamic world, establishing Aceh as one of Southeast Asia's leading maritime powers. Nevertheless, Ottoman influence did not diminish the indigenous innovations of the Aceh Sultanate. The kingdom maintained unique practices rooted in its internal developments, including the recruitment of female soldiers and the appointment of female generals such as Malahayati, practices absent from Ottoman tradition.

In summary, the Ottoman-Acehnese relationship highlights the interconnectedness of the Islamic world in confronting colonial expansion and demonstrates how states such as Aceh actively participated in global Islamic networks to achieve political autonomy, military strength, and spiritual legitimacy. Ottoman involvement revitalized Aceh's ties to the broader Islamic community, reinforcing a collective determination and shared purpose to address the challenges facing the Muslim world.

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