

**FROM HARBOUR AUTOCRACIES TO 'FEUDAL' DIFFUSION IN
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY INDONESIA: THE CASE OF ACEH**

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In Indonesia, as in most Asian countries, the term 'feudalism' became very popular in the 1930s and '40s. It was part of the jargon which nationalists accepted eagerly from Marxism, because it seemed to locate their own societies on a linear path of inevitable progress. By making an explicit analogy with European history, it emphasized that the royal courts and aristocratic officials protected by the colonial order were in fact anachronistic doomed relics of an earlier age. It helped legitimate the aspiration of nationalists to replace not only colonialism but also the internal hierarchy based on birth by a more democratic order in which education and the skills of mass mobilization would be adequately rewarded. At a popular level 'feudal' became simply the pejorative equivalent for 'aristocratic' or 'traditional'.

During the period of revolution this view was accepted not only by Marxists and by nationalist politicians like Sukarno,¹ but by most of those attempting to write serious history. The major national history of this period was entitled 'The Feudal Struggle of Indonesia'.² Recent Indonesian historians, on the other hand, have shared the caution of most outsiders on this issue, avoiding broad Europe-derived categories such as 'feudal' in favour of detailed description.³

A Southeast Asian Transition

Even so, the 'big' categories like antiquity, slavery, feudalism and capitalism still serve to remind the historian of Asia, as of Europe, that some major transitions have encompassed a number of disparate societies, and therefore demand explanations that rise above the parochialism of culture or nation. In this paper we wish to focus attention on one such transition in Southeast Asia. It is the shift from a pattern of autocratic states dominated by their commercial port-capitals to one of power diffused among

chiefdoms or domains which recognized the aura of the earlier kingdoms without replicating their centralized military or legal coherence. Although the most important phase of this transition occurred in the late seventeenth century, its European parallels are rather those of the passage from Antiquity to Feudalism.

The late sixteenth and still more the early seventeenth centuries witnessed a striking array of powerful city-centred kingdoms inspiring the admiration of European observers - the Burma of Kings Bayinnaung (1551-81) and Anaukpetlun (1606-29); the Ayutthaya (Siam) of Kings Songtham and Prasat Thong (1610-56); the Mataram (Java) of Sultan Agung and Amangkurat I (1613-77); the Makassar of Sultans Mohammad Said and Hasanuddin (1639-69); and the Aceh of Sultans al-Mukammil and Iskandar Muda (1589-1636). The key features of these autocratic kingdoms might be classified as:

1. Enormous armies mobilizing a large proportion of total available manpower. A small standing army of palace guards, foreign mercenaries, etc. Strict royal control of firearms. Numerous state captives resulting from wars of conquest.
2. International trade centred at a single port under royal control (the capital in all cases except Mataram). Revenues of the crown largely dependent on the flourishing port, including a large sector of royal trade.
3. Forced attendance at court for leading nobles of the realm.
4. Some bureaucratization of government, with officials appointed at intervals rather than hereditary.
5. Codification of laws and institutionalization of legal structures, frequently using Indic or Islamic models to justify centralised law-making by the court.
6. Development of an urban cosmopolitan culture, which completely dominated the countryside and provided the cultural model for later periods.

Most historians, like most contemporary observers, have looked at these developments from the point of view of a single country, and have therefore explained the powerful autocracies in terms of the capacity of individual rulers, and subsequent diffusion of power as the result of internal conflict, external pressure, or the ineptitude of eighteenth century rulers.⁴ Having pointed to a similar phenomenon in a number of countries, we are obliged to look for some underlying structural factors. The most important would appear to be international trade, firearms, and the role of Europeans in Asia.

Until the middle third of the seventeenth century, the role of European traders and trading companies appeared to work in favour of strong rulers, apart perhaps from the disruptions caused by the first few years of the Portuguese onslaught. In their pursuit of stable supplies of spices and other tropical goods, the Europeans preferred to make monopolistic agreements with rulers who appeared to control a large proportion of pepper or clove supplies,

thereby often getting the better of the Indian merchants or of European rivals. As the VOC took root in Asia, however, it fought hard for a total monopoly of Southeast Asian spices, eventually succeeding in destroying militarily the remaining indigenous ports of greatest significance in the spice trade - Banten and Makassar - while detaching the main pepper-producing areas from their allegiance to Aceh. The English, French, and Danes, who had been more active in encouraging the state trading of powerful rulers of Banten, Ayutthaya and Makassar, were expelled either by Dutch arms or by internal revolutions by the end of the seventeenth century.

The earliest firearms to be adopted into Southeast Asian warfare were cannons. In the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries they were generally presented to, bought by, or made for the King alone. Certainly the stronger rulers made a point of controlling both the artillery and the gunpowder - a considerable departure from tradition in an area where no man considered himself adequately dressed without a *keris* or knife of some sort. As hand-held guns became more common and more effective, however, it became increasingly difficult for rulers to maintain such a monopoly on firearms. While the manufacture of cannon appears to have been limited to craftsmen working under royal patronage, muskets in the eighteenth century were being made and exported by craftsmen in Bali, the Bugis area, and Minangkabau - all areas with markedly fragmented political structures.

More opaque than such external factors are the internal ones, having to do with the effectiveness and durability of the administrative structures built up during the period of autocracy. In this paper we can do no more than invite the attention of other scholars to investigate the problem further. At first glance it appears difficult to develop a general explanation which will work for all the following cases, but we ought to remember that there is a similar diversity in the range of European transitions from antiquity to feudalism, and from feudalism to capitalism, which has never prevented the search for general explanations.

Java: The military success of Sultan Agung (1613-45), followed by the tyrannical excesses of Amangkurat I (1645-77) produce rebellion, Dutch intervention, and eventual permanent division of Java into competing kingdoms (1755).

Bali: The 'Kingdom' of Bali, with its capital at Gelgel, fragments permanently into eight kingdoms, at the end of the seventeenth century.

South Sulawesi: The domination of Makassar over the whole of South Sulawesi endures from 1610 to 1669, with steadily increasing centralization, until the Dutch conquest of Makassar brings about a fragmentation into numerous states and sub-states.⁵

Banten: This was conquered by the Dutch in 1684, and thereafter Banten loses its international trade and its ability to control tightly its Sumatran dependencies.

Banjarmasin, Palembang, Ternate, Johor, Brunei: Loss of international trade makes it increasingly difficult in late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to control dependencies of these kingdoms.

Siam: The revolution of 1688 expells European state-trading partners of the King, and the early eighteenth century witnesses progressive loss of manpower from King to aristocracy.⁶

Burma: The capital of Burma moves inland from Pegu to Ava 1635, after which there was no strong royal role in international trade; and there was a steady decline of central control from the death of Tha-lun (1648) to the fall of Ava (1752).⁷

There is a significant recovery in central authority in the nineteenth century, beginning earlier in Siam and Burma but also affecting the still-independent Indonesian states of Aceh and Lombok in the second half of the nineteenth century. In general, however, there is still an enormous gap between the picture given by the standard literature on nineteenth-century Southeast Asian states - Gullick on the Malay States; Brown on Brunei, Snouck Hurgronje on Aceh, Crawford on Siam, Friedericy on South Sulawesi,⁸ etc - and that on the states of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Aceh

Let us now turn to Aceh, the Islamic Sultanate at the northwest extremity of Sumatra, as a case study of this more general process of transition. At least among Indonesian states it has the unique advantage of a continuous history uninterrupted by direct outside intervention until the late nineteenth century, as well as some new data from Dutch and Acehnese sources.

As in the cases sketched above, the contrast is extreme between the Aceh described by European travelers such as Admiral de Beaulieu in 1629 and that described by Snouck Hurgronje and other Dutch scholars in the late nineteenth century. According to Beaulieu, Sultan Iskandar Muda could raise an army of 40,000 men within 24 hours. He had in addition a permanent palace guard of 1,500 slaves primarily foreigners', together with 3,000 women who conducted guard and other duties in the palace. The armoury, containing over 2000 cannon, was under strict royal control, with firearms issued to the army only at the time of a campaign. The king's writ ran throughout northern and western Sumatra and much of the Malay Peninsula, and foreigners could trade for the coveted pepper only on his terms. Nobles were kept loyal by draconian punishments against them or their families, and by a system of rotation whereby one third of their number were held as hostages within the palace on any given night.⁹ Internally, the image of Iskandar Muda's power among later generations of Acehnese was such that all laws were conventionally ascribed to him, and his name was invoked on the seals of all subsequent sultans.

The Aceh portrayed by the Dutch Islamicist Snouck Hurgronje identified real power in Aceh as lying with dozens of *uleebalang*

(108 were eventually recognized by the Dutch) who were hereditary 'governors, judges and military leaders in their own country, in which they admit no higher authority'.¹⁰ The effective power of the Sultan was limited to his palace, even though he was honoured everywhere in Aceh.¹¹ Although the Sultan had no capacity to affect the succession of *uleebalang*, the twelve leading *uleebalang* were authorized by tradition to confer the throne on the royally-born candidate of their choosing.

As explained in general terms above, there is a superficial external cause of this transformation in the steady decline of Aceh's role as a major international port in the Bay of Bengal and one of the leading suppliers of the world's pepper - a decline which continued with few interruptions between about 1630 and 1820. Although Acehnese pepper-exports revived strongly in the nineteenth century the capital no longer had enough control over the pepper-exporting areas to draw more than a token share of the revenue thus produced. The decline in trade is as much a consequence as a cause of internal transformation, however, and it certainly does not suffice as an explanation of the profound structural change.

Although there has been considerable speculation on the origins of the nineteenth-century Acehnese system of *uleebalang*, together with the smaller *mukim* units below them and the federations of *uleebalang* called *sagi* above them, there has been insufficient data to resolve the issue. Snouck Hurgronje, a dominating influence on all subsequent scholarship, is particularly unhelpful on this issue. He was determined to portray the Sultanate as weak and irrelevant in order to kill any further attempts at peaceful negotiation with it in his own day, and in consequence he assumed without evidence that the *uleebalang* and *sagi* predated the Sultan. By contrast the argument we present here is that the key features of the 'diffuse' Acehnese political system of the nineteenth century took shape essentially in the half-century which followed the death of Iskandar Muda in 1637.

The Acehnese state was formed in the two decades which followed the Portuguese appearance in Southeast Asia (1509) as the result of a counter-crusade against the Portuguese and their allies in the Malay World. The hitherto miniscule port state of Banda Aceh Dar as-Salam conquered Daya on the west coast (1520) and Pidie and Pasai on the north coast (1521 and 1524), in the process expelling the Portuguese who had intervened there. Through most of the sixteenth century the military struggle against the Portuguese in Malacca helped unify under the Acehnese sultans the previously distinct states and cultures scattered along 1,000 miles of the Sumatran coast.

The first reference we have to *uleebalang* is in this military context - among the Acehnese troops assaulting Portuguese Malacca in 1547.¹² This Portuguese reference confirms the original meaning of *uleebalang* as war-leader, a usage which still occurs in Malay

(*hulubalang*) though retained in Acehese only through the old literature, the everyday meaning having changed completely by the nineteenth century.¹³ Acehese chronicles already refer to the leading men of the kingdom as *uleebalang* by the 1570s,¹⁴ that is following the warlike reign of Sultan Ala'ad-din Ri'ayat Syah al-Kahar (1539-71). It seems likely therefore that by this time *uleebalang* had a dual function as war-leaders and territorial chiefs, having been rewarded with grants of land in the areas conquered by earlier expansionist Sultans. The most valuable land of the time was undoubtedly along the northern coast, especially around Pidie and Pasai, since this was the main source of pepper-exports in the sixteenth century.¹⁵ Such grants would have provided the means whereby *uleebalang* could furnish the men and resources needed for further military campaigns. Despite this development, the large pre-conquest states appear to have retained some identity as tributary states, since we know that a number of sixteenth century rulers appointed their sons as *raja* (rulers) of Pidie, Pasai, Deli (in East Sumatra) and Periaman (in West Sumatra).¹⁶ One of the earliest lists of the great men of the realm, referring to 1579, begins 'all the *raja*, and *kadi* (religious officials) and *uleebalang*'.¹⁷

We do not know whether the appointments of *raja* and of the *uleebalang* who were presumably subordinate to them were intended to have a permanent, hereditary character. They may well have begun to assume such rights for themselves in the 1570s and '80s when four successive Sultans were deposed or killed by the nobles of the capital. It is quite clear, however, that the two strongest rulers of the early seventeenth century had no time for any such hereditary claims, and went to great lengths in creating new local elites dependent wholly on themselves. The first of these exceptionally authoritarian rulers was Ala'ad-din Ri'ayat Syah Sayyid al-Mukammil (1589-1604) who reasserted royal power in no uncertain terms. Davis reported that 'he ended the lives of more than a thousand Noblemen and Gentlemen, and of the rascall people made new Lords and New Lawes [sic]'.¹⁸ According to Beaulie, who unlike Davis must have heard the story only 30 years after the event, this Sultan justified his tyranny by declaring:

that as King, he did not wish to be only a shadow, nor to be the plaything of the fickle humours of the *orangkaya* (nobles), who after massacring him would have relapsed into their former disputes ... that moreover his intention was to preserve peace for all, impose severe justice on evildoers, and reign equitably.¹⁹

The grandson and protegee of al-Mukammil, Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-36), took this tough policy to new heights. It was also reported of him that 'He has exterminated almost all the ancient nobility, and has created new ones'.²⁰ As we have seen, this Sultan also devised very effective means of retaining the loyalty of his new appointees. As described by the many European visitors to his capital, a complex administrative and judicial

hierarchy developed under his authority, while the slightest hint of disloyalty or failure on the part of the *uleebalang* elite was punished with exemplary cruelty.²¹

Some evidence of the way in which Iskandar Muda created new benefices for those he raised to office occurs in two surviving *sarakata* (royal decrees), one dating from the early eighteenth century and the other from the nineteenth century. Both record that in 1613 Sultan Iskandar Muda granted a certain *Orangkaya* a territory in Samalanga (on the north coast bordering Pidie) consisting of six *mukim*. Thirty or more years later, in the reign of Iskandar Muda's daughter, this grant was confirmed to the same beneficiary who now had the title of Orangkaya Seri Paduka Tuan Seberang.²² The validity of these documents is confirmed by Dutch reports²³ which identify this same man as Panglima Bandar or port administrator under the Sultana Safiyyat al-Din until his death in 1663 (or 1658 according to the *sarakata*). As the *sarakata* also tell us that the land grant passed to his son, we may conclude that the benefice granted to a retainer by Iskandar Muda had become hereditary under his successors.

There appears to be no reference to the *mukim* of Aceh earlier than this 1613 grant. The origin of the division of Aceh into *mukim* (from Arabic *muqim*, an adult male resident in a particular parish, and perhaps, by extension, the parish itself) may therefore be due to the initiative of Sultan Iskandar Muda, as suggested by some earlier writers.²⁴ Iskandar Muda was known as a great mosque-builder, a patron of *ulama* (especially those of the Wujuddiya mystical school), and a promoter of Islamic law.²⁵ He may therefore have appointed *imam* to be in charge of *mukim* throughout Aceh, in part to improve the practice of Islam, but also to act as a check on the power of those *uleebalang* who enjoyed benefices comprising several *mukim*. Under subsequent, weaker rulers, these *imam* became hereditary, secular chiefs of their *mukim*; sometimes themselves assuming the title *uleebalang* as well as that of *imam*. Already in a decree of 1640 two *imam* were listed among a list of royal officials or vassals in Pasai and Samalanga who had to pay a specified annual tribute to the king.²⁶ By the nineteenth century the *imam* who presided over Friday prayer at mosques throughout Aceh were entirely distinct from these chiefs of the *mukim*.²⁷

The benefice granted by Iskandar Muda in 1613 discussed above was almost certainly not an isolated one. For the following reign, that of Iskandar Muda's son-in-law Iskandar Thani (1636-41), the better evidence available to us shows a pattern of regular grants of land to retainers. One Dutch report in 1640 noted that one of the palace eunuchs, Seri Bijaya, was in charge of 'revenue from lands', and had to decide which lands would be granted as benefices to the officers in charge of the royal bodyguard.²⁸ A decree probably from the same reign, recorded in the Acehnese compilation of edicts and law codes, the *Adat Aceh*, lists nine territories in the Pasai region with their approximate territorial limits. Many

of these belonged to the great men of the capital, including the Sultan himself, the Orang Kaya Maharaja and the Laksamana.²⁹

It is clear from the tight control Sultan Iskandar Muda exercised over his vassals and courtiers that any benefices granted were at his pleasure, and in no sense intended to be hereditary or permanent. It seems significant in this context that the royal decree or *sarakata*, which in the nineteenth century was taken as proof of an *uleebalang's* hereditary right to his territory, as late as 1660 described as an unsealed ordinance given by the ruler 'until its recantation', in contrast to an *Eseuteumi* - a sealed decree of 'everlasting validity'.³⁰ In the decades after his death in 1636, however the nature of these benefices appears to have changed fundamentally and become permanent.

The choice of successors to Iskandar Muda is indicative of the ambivalent attitude of the court elite towards his reign. On the one hand the aura of his greatness continued; on the other nobody wanted to have to endure such a reign of terror again. Iskandar Muda appears to have left no legitimate male heir alive, but he had shown great favour to a captured Malay prince from Pahang, who as a boy of nine had been allowed to marry the Sultan's daughter and to occupy a prominent place at court. This foreign prince succeeded as Sultan Iskandar Thani, and his rule appears to have been peaceful and prosperous, though Aceh's external power vis-à-vis the Dutch was allowed to erode somewhat.

At his death in 1641 the powerful *orangkaya* jockeyed for position for some days 'for each one wanted to be king', according to a Dutch eye-witness.³¹ Eventually they resolved to crown the bereaved queen, Iskandar Thani's widow and Iskandar Muda's daughter, as the first female ruler of the country. Although she was held in great respect as the final arbiter in matters of state, the Sultana Safiyyat ad-Din Taj ul-Alam Syah (1641-75) had much less power vis-à-vis the half-dozen most powerful men of the realm than did her father. The horrendous executions and punishments for disloyalty, which marked the reign of Iskandar Muda and even to a lesser extent that of Iskandar Thani seem to have been wholly absent from her style of government. Both internal and external sources suggest that Aceh under this queen was well-ordered and prosperous, with a climate very favourable to foreign commerce.³² At her death in 1675 the experiment with female rule was deemed so successful that it was repeated three more times. 'The very name of kinge is long since become nautious to them, first caused through the Tyrannical Government of there last king' [sic] (i.e. last but one - Iskandar Muda).³³ Female rule, in other words, had come to seem synonymous with a quite different political order, attractive to the dominant elite in the capital.

It is not surprising that the leading *orangkaya*, most of whom had been courtiers or officials at the end of Iskandar Muda's reign, should have been reluctant to return to such a regime. At the

very beginning of Taj ul-Alam's reign four of these *orangkaya* formed a kind of executive council which took many political decisions.³⁴ Whereas tribute from Aceh's dependencies and exactions on trade went overwhelmingly to the ruler in Iskandar Muda's day, a large share now began to be channeled to these *orangkaya*.³⁵ Dutch reports note that the great latitude the Queen allowed to her *orangkaya* gave rise to conflicts among them, so that the Sultana's remaining authority was largely derived from a careful balancing act between two major factions at the court.³⁶ The diversion of resources into the hands of a numerous oligarchy, however, unquestionably reduced Aceh's military capacity to resist the rising threat from the Dutch. The VOC became the dominant naval power in the Straits of Malacca after its capture of Malacca (1641), and Aceh seemed powerless to resist Dutch demands, carried out through a blockade in 1647-50, for a dominant share in Perak tin exports and West Sumatran pepper.³⁷

The conflicts between these *orangkaya* incidentally shed valuable light on changes in the attitude to royal benefices. In 1642, the resident Dutch factors reported, a dispute arose between the major court factions over rights to land in the rich rice-growing Pidie area. The Maharaja Sri Maharaja was alleged by his rivals to have acquired some of his lands in the region improperly during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Thani.³⁸ Eventually the Queen resolved the question by ruling that only grants of land made by her father, Sultan Iskandar Muda, would be recognised as valid.³⁹ The charisma of the great Sultan, in other words, was invoked to support a policy very different from his - making land-grants permanent and hereditary. Part of the reason for the installation of a relatively weak ruler, indeed, must have been to prevent a repetition of the carnage and the attendant re-allocation of benefices which had occurred under al-Mukammil and Iskandar Muda.

The *uleebalang* and *orangkaya* who had once been granted land to assist them to fulfil their obligation to the king quickly became hereditary rulers of these territories, where possible tracing their claim to a grant from Iskandar Muda. By the time of the *Hikayat Pocut Mohammad*, written in the early eighteenth century, the term *uleebalang* carried its modern meaning. It represented the hereditary ruler of a number of *mukim*, needing to be wooed by any Sultan or aspirant Sultan before any action could be undertaken.⁴⁰ Many of these hereditary dynasties bore titles betraying their origins in officials of the royal court - *Maharaja* in Lhokseumawe (Pasai); *Laksamana* in Ndjong (Pidie); *Mantrou* (Malay *Mantri*, minister) in several other Pidie districts.

We have explained above that sixteenth-century Acehnese kings appointed their sons as *raja* of conquered states - Pidie, Pasai, Deli and Periaman. This indicates that these large satraps remained as units above the level of the *uleebalang* benefices. The last such appointment appears to have been Iskandar Muda's of his only legitimate son as Raja Pidie in the early part of his

reign.⁴¹ Iskandar Muda was intolerant of anybody, including his relatives, building a significant power base which might eventually be used against him. He therefore developed the institution of *panglima* (governor) as a means of controlling his provinces. The principal function of a *panglima* appears to have been to ensure that the tribute, port duties, and commercial regulations imposed by Iskandar Muda were implemented to the letter, so that the resources of the important export centres flowed to his treasury. We therefore hear most of *panglima* in the pepper-exporting areas on the west coast of Aceh. By 1621 the coast as far south as Padang was tightly controlled through two *panglima* placed at Tiku and Periaman. Beaulieu tells us that these officials were replaced every three years to ensure that they did not escape his control. While in office they had to report personally to the court every year.⁴² In 1633 Inderapura, further south, was added to Acehese territory and a *panglima* appointed there.⁴³ More *panglima* were appointed after Iskandar Muda's death, and in the 1660s they were reported at seven west coast ports - Barus, Pasaman, Tiku, Periaman, Padang, Salida and Inderapura.⁴⁴ Each *panglima* had a small staff comprising two writers (*kerkun*), a weigh-mast (*Penghulu Dacing*), and a port security official (*Penghulu Kawal*), emphasizing the role of the office in controlling trade.⁴⁵

In the provinces to the east of the capital export production was less crucial and the role of *panglima* accordingly less clear. Tin-rich Perak on the Malay Peninsula was under Acehese authority for several decades after 1620, and an Acehese *panglima* does at times appear to have been based there.⁴⁶ In such non-Acehese territories, however, more attention appears to have been given to manipulating the indigenous *raja* or if necessary replacing him. A local Malay, Minangkabau or Batak hereditary elite continued to govern these territories even when Acehese officials kept a tight control of the export trade.⁴⁷

In the inner areas of the north coast which must by this point be considered ethnically assimilated to Aceh, *panglima* may have been experimented with as a replacement for the role once taken in Pidie and Pasai by royal princes. There is a Dutch report as late as 1649 of a 'Panglima Pidie' presenting the Queen with a tribute of rice, coconuts, sugar and betel,⁴⁸ and an earlier 'Panglima Pidie' was a hero of the *Hikayat Malem Dagang* set in the reign of Iskandar Muda.⁴⁹ In such areas, however, the *uleebalang* benefice-holders appear to have had direct relations with the court, and left little scope for a *panglima*. In the wars of the early eighteenth century many regional leaders carry the title of *panglima*, suggesting descent from one of these seventeenth century officials, but none had any special relationship with the capital.⁵⁰ It seems safe to assume that the office of *panglima* as a device for controlling the provinces disappeared with the loss of the west coast pepper-growing dependencies in the 1660s.

During the two decades following the death of Iskandar Muda, then, *uleebalang* benefice-holders appear to have established

permanent claims to estates made up of several *mukim* in Acehnese areas of the North Sumatran littoral. As the trade of Banda Aceh (the capital) and the ruler's share in it both declined steadily, such estates must have assumed gradually greater importance as against an advantageous place at court. The pepper exports which had been the key to Aceh's prosperity vanished with the loss of the West Coast ports and Deli under Taj ul-Alam. The valuable tin exports of Perak were lost at about the same time, leaving Banda Aceh dependent on the relatively modest export of gold, elephants, horses and forest products. Having always been affluent enough to import rice for its substantial urban population, Aceh towards the end of the seventeenth century had to expand greatly its own production of foodstuffs - particularly in the hitherto neglected Aceh River Valley adjacent to the capital.⁵¹ This in turn meant that *uleebalang* arose there with large numbers of men under their control, close enough to the capital to have direct influence on its politics.

Although the first of Aceh's four queens, Taj ul-Alam (1641-75), was still strong and respected, this was less true of each of her successors in turn. In 1688, near the end of the reign of the third, an Italian missionary noted that 'they elect no more kings but Queens, though in fact it is seven of the nobles who rule the kingdom'.⁵² Ten years later a French visitor was sceptical whether the Queen even existed, since power was divided among the nobles of the court.⁵³ This type of oligarchy was favoured in the cosmopolitan commercial environment of the city, but these new *uleebalang* of the interior were increasingly intolerant of it. Their leader was the first Panglima Polem, reputedly an illegitimate son of Sultan Iskandar Muda and elder half-brother of Taj ul-Alam, who had settled at Gle Yeueng about 30 km above the capital. He and his son emerged during the period of female rule as the chief opponents of its continuation. At the death of each of the queens their followers demanded that the throne pass to this Panglima Polem dynasty. In 1675, 1678, and 1688 they mobilized men from what became known as the Sagi (corner) of the XXII *Mukim*, centred on Gle Yeueng, to march on the capital in a vain attempt to decide the succession.⁵⁴ When female rule was finally abolished in 1699, however, the throne passed to new men of Arab origin and then to men of Bugis extraction who competed for support among the *uleebalang*. In these struggles Panglima Polem became not king but king-maker, or more frequently king-unmaker. By the time relative stability returned in the 1730s, various aphorisms had become current asserting that Panglima Polem, either himself,⁵⁵ or acting as one of three or twelve leading *uleebalang* of the Aceh Valley area (known as Aceh Besar),⁵⁶ had 'the power to enthrone and dethrone Sultans'.

In little more than half a century, an autocracy centred in a flourishing port had been transformed into a diffuse polity of hereditary nobles bound together by the memory and heritage of a common past. Just as the European vernaculars emerged

from the domination of Latin with the transition to feudalism, Acehnese emerged in the early eighteenth century from the hegemony of Malay, in which all known texts had been written during the literary 'golden age' which accompanied autocracy.⁵⁷ Another congruence with the European transition to feudalism was the rapid decline of slavery, which had relied, in autocratic Aceh as in Ancient Rome, on a successful urban culture with a high level of new slave recruits through warfare.⁵⁸ Cultural assimilation, with the excessive cost of maintaining slaves, transformed the bottom class of Acehnese society into peasants owing numerous services to their *uleebalang* lord, yet perhaps not serfs in the sense that that category was juridically defined in Europe.

Conclusion

The social and cultural differences between Europe and Southeast Asia are sufficiently obvious to make anyone beware of applying the label 'feudal' to the diffuse political system we have described. Even though some classic characterisations of the key features of feudalism⁵⁹ are compatible with Aceh and other Southeast Asian societies in the eighteenth century, there are crucial features of the latter which remain very different - the autonomous role of cities, of the Church, and of law have no real equivalents in Southeast Asia, for example. We prefer to emphasize here that a *transition* of similar magnitude as that from Antiquity to Feudalism appears to have taken place in many parts of Southeast Asia, centring in the late seventeenth century. It is to such transitions, rather than to the pursuit of static equivalences, that the attention of historians should be primarily directed.

NOTES

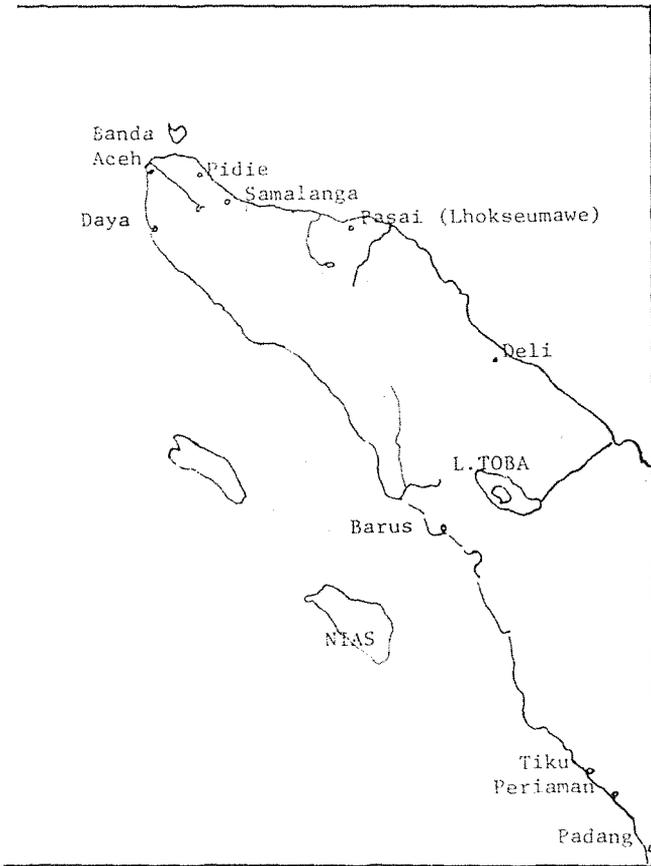
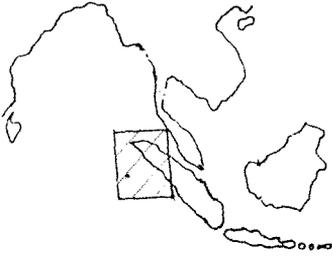
1. Sukarno, *Mentjapai Indonesia Merdeka* (originally published 1933 - Jakarta, n.d.), p. 10.
2. R. Mohammad Ali, *Perjuangan Feodal Indonesia* (Jakarta, 1952 - though written in 1948).
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57. Malay borrowings in Achenese are today characteristic of the language of the ruling class of *uleebalang* - another indication of the origins of this class in the cosmopolitan and cultured capital. (Information from Mark Durie.)
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