

Architecture and the Politics of Identity in Indonesia
A Study of the Cultural History of Aceh

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ABSTRACT

While the history of the region of Aceh is intertwined with the history of Indonesia, contemporary literature provides only scanty information on the cultural and architectural heritage of Aceh. This study explores the cultural history of Aceh to reveal, on the one hand, its distinctive richness and the role it has played in shaping the contemporary history of Indonesia, and on the other, the influence of the socio-political developments in post-independence Indonesia on the shaping of Aceh's cultural, urban and architectural identity.

The study focuses on the discourse of architectural identity in post-independence Indonesia in general and the region of Aceh in particular. It examines the ways in which architecture and urban spaces are conceived and represented by Indonesian scholars and politicians, and the ways in which they are politicalised and aestheticised to represent a uniform Indonesian identity, including that of Aceh. The study argues that such uniform and rigid representation is problematic, for it tends to obliterate differences and to reduce the richness and diversity of the Indonesian culture to a simplified pattern of predictable characteristics. It further argues that cultural identity evolves over time and is difficult to fix within rigid frames and definitions. The main aim is to deconstruct the current conceptions about Aceh, to shed new light on its cultural history, and to explore new ways of understanding architectural and urban identity within a dialogical frame of socio-cultural processes involving local and global forces.

In constructing a cultural and architectural history of Aceh, the study consults modern and premodern sources. It shuttles between precolonial, colonial and postcolonial contexts to analyse the processes of modernity and visionary politics in Indonesia under the regimes of Sukarno and Suharto. It examines Sukarno's emphasis on tradition and Suharto's attempt to re-invent tradition through the notion of "New Order," which tends to re-employs colonial imaginings of precolonial past for political advantages. In this political context, the study examines the rise of the international discourse of regionalism and the related question of identity. It traces its appropriation by architects and scholars in the developing world and articulates the Indonesian voice in the development of this discourse. The study concludes by reflecting on ways of engagements beyond the assumptions and predicaments of culture and identity.

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DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I consent to the thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

Izziah Hasan

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