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Separatist Conflict in Indonesia

The long-distance politics of the Acehnese diaspora

Antje Missbach

Separatist Conflict in Indonesia

The socio-political activities of the Acehnese diaspora, located mainly in Malaysia, Scandinavia, the US and Australia, have been of fundamental importance to conflict and politics within Aceh. The intensity of the relations between the diaspora and the homeland was mainly determined by the conflict that afflicted the region between 1976 and 2005, and the resulting hardship was experienced by Acehnese both at home and abroad.

This book looks at more than 30 years of long-distance politics exercised by the Acehnese diaspora both during the conflict and beyond. It interprets the social, political and cultural aspects of the small-scale conflict in Aceh, as well as focusing on external factors related to the Acehnese overseas and their impact on homeland politics. The book goes on to contribute to the argument that the Acehnese diaspora had a significant impact on those who remained in Aceh. By focusing on the triangular relationships between the homeland, the host countries and the Acehnese diaspora, the book draws attention to the exchange of people, ideas and financial and material resources that has occurred. It is a useful contribution to Southeast Asian Politics and Diaspora Studies.

Antje Missbach obtained her PhD from the Australian National University in Canberra. She has taught at Humboldt University in Berlin and at Heidelberg University. Currently she is a McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Melbourne.

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Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2012
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Missbach, Antje.

Separatist conflict in Indonesia : the long-distance politics of the Acehnese diaspora / Antje Missbach.

p. cm. – (Routledge contemporary Southeast Asia series; 39)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Indonesia) – History – Autonomy and independence movements. 2. Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Indonesia) – Politics and government. 3. Achinese (Indonesian people) – Foreign countries. I. Title. II. Series: Routledge contemporary Southeast Asia series; 39.

DS646.15.A8M57 2011

959.8'1103—dc22

2011012954

ISBN: 978-0-415-66896-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-80305-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Times

by Cenveo Publisher Services

For Karin, Susann and Sophie

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Acknowledgements

My interest in Aceh reaches back to the late 1990s when a group of Acehnese students visited the institute where I was studying at the time. While much had been heard about the students' role in regard to ousting President Suharto and pushing for democratic reforms in other parts of Indonesia, the situation in Aceh remained concealed from external observers, though rumours of renewed guerrilla activity and violent counterinsurgency measures had taken off. The visiting Acehnese students gave us not only a shocking account of human rights violations that had been and still were taking place in Indonesia's western-most province, but they informed us about their role in orchestrating societal support for a pro-independence referendum, while also urging us to form an Aceh support group in Berlin. Although this plea remained unfulfilled, the politics in Aceh kept me fascinated throughout my studies. While my interest at first was in the configuration of the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) and its struggle for independence from Indonesia, it later shifted to GAM's external support base, not least as I had made contact with the exiled leadership of GAM in Stockholm. This book is the outcome of the research about the Acehnese diaspora that I conducted for my doctoral degree. Before, during and after my PhD-candidature, many people have assisted me generously in accomplishing my work, and to both those named and unnamed I am most grateful for their continuing support and encouragement.

First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to Edward Aspinall who supervised me during my studies at the Australian National University in Canberra, providing me with invaluable inspiring criticism and scholarly advice. I learnt from him a great deal about doing fieldwork and also about intelligible academic writing. I owe Ed a debt of gratitude for sharing information and insights with me as well as for facilitating contacts with Acehnese informants. My thanks go also to Nicholas Tapp and Benedict Kerkvliet, who provided me with excellent advice about relevant literature and commented on several draft chapters and papers. A number of other academics have shown interest in my work. Robert Cribb, Harold Crouch, Ashley Carruthers, Marcus Mietzner, Michelle Miller, Ana Dragojlovic, Mandy Thomas and David Hill took their time to listen to my ideas, read

draft versions and provided me with opportunities to present in their workshops. Moreover, I am thankful to a number of academics who share an academic interest in Aceh and/or diaspora(s): to Kamarulzaman Askandar and Ayesha Abubakar for being a great source of information and inspiration, to Alice Nah for sharing her insider's point of view on Acehnese refugees in Malaysia with me, Marie Jensen for her translations of Danish refugee guidebooks into English, Ingo Wandelt for including me in his Aceh update emailing list and also Karla Smith for our cooperation at the Euroseas conference in 2007. Special thanks go to my German colleagues Gunnar Stange, Kristina Grossmann and Roman Patock for the stimulating discussions we had on the post-conflict developments in Aceh and the intensive exchange of ideas, research material and drafts.

Conducting extensive multi-sited fieldwork and travelling to conferences overseas would not have been possible without substantial financial backing from several funding sources. I am indebted to the Australian National University for granting me a scholarship, the International Postgraduate Research Scholarship for covering my study fees, the Department of Political and Social Change for paying my fieldwork expenses and conference trips, the Vice-Chancellor's Travel Grant that allowed me additional field trips, and also to the Aceh Research Training Institute, Australia–Netherlands Research Collaboration and the Zentrum Moderner Orient for their financial support. Moreover, during diverse fellowships I enjoyed the hospitality from the Unit for Peace Research and Education of the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, the Utrikespolitiska Institutet in Stockholm and the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde in Leiden. I would like to express my gratitude to Tomas Ries, Kristin Ljungkvist, Gunnar Sjöstedt, Henk Schulte Nordholt, Gerry van Klinken, Fridus Steijlen, Doris Jedamski, Esrih Bakker, Ulrike Freitag and Kai Kresse. Last but not least I am indebted to my former mentors at the Humboldt University, both Ingrid Wessel and Vincent Houben not only sparked my interests in Indonesian history and society, but also provided me with practical guidance through academia's bureaucratic jungles.

This book would not have been possible without the generous help of my informants, who lent me their time, explained their views and challenged my perceptions. Although they might not agree with my interpretations in every way, I am indebted to them for sharing their insights with me. In Aceh my special thanks go to Kautsar, Nur Djuli, Shadia Marhaban, Aguswandi, Lina Frödin and Renate Korber for their valuable assistance. In Malaysia I benefited immensely from the support of Muna Djuli and her family, Basri Yusuf, Mahmud Muhammad and Ramasamy Palanisamy. In Denmark I was assisted enormously by Tarmizi Age and Adnan Daud and both their families. In Sweden, I owe gratitude to Bakhtiar Abdullah, Asnawi Ali, Husaini Hasan, Yusuf Daud and Musanna Djalil for sharing their time and insights with me and also for continuing our discussions via email. In Norway I had the pleasure to meet Abdul Qadir Abdullah and his family

and Erna. In the US I experienced the kind support of Musanna Tiro, Mahfuz and Muhammad Nurul Al-Khalil. In Australia I benefited from the support of Nurdin Abdur Rahman and his relatives, Chalidin Yacob, Dahlan Muhammad, Hannah Derwent and Eko Waluyo. Last but not least, I give special thanks to Eric Avebury for sending me copies of his correspondence on behalf of the Acehnese prisoners in Malaysia and also to the family of the late Teuku Don for providing me with copies of his letters. Anne Looker and Allison Ley deserve special mentioning for proofreading and copy-editing several rounds of drafts for my thesis. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers from Routledge who provided me with substantial feedback for revising my original draft.

Without the moral support of my friends and the kind hospitality of friends this book would have never seen the light of day. Special thanks go to Wanda Jolanda Sumual Beeby and Stephen Beeby, Rahadian Permadi and Kim-Louise van den Nouwelant, Norbert Ebert and Peta Hinton, Doro Keller and Eva Asmus from the Rumah Meminjau, Senthil Sockalingam, Henriette Sachse and Markus Hutschneider, Heidrun Unterbeck Downing and Tony Downing, Wolf Blaum, Martin Rufenach, Taufiq Almakmun, Minna Frederiksson and Andre Emil, Katie and Robert Anderson, Jane Maze, George Darroch, Kaori Ikeda, Dani Wittmeier, Peter Lohmann, Gabriele Zimnoch, Paul Rogieux, Maj Nygaard-Christensen, Gunnar Andersson, Anh Nguyen, Sindy Herrman, Frederik Holst, Tino Breitbarth, Enrico Dähnert and Philipp Burtzlaff. Very special thanks go to Frieda Sinanu, Annett Fleischer and Katrin Bosshard and finally to my family for supporting me through thick and thin.

Sections of this book draw on previously published material. Preliminary ideas for this book were already indicated in ‘Managing heterogeneity within a “transnational community of co-responsibility”: exploratory snapshots of Acehnese diasporic life experiences in Sydney’, in Streifeneder, Eva and Antje Missbach (eds) (2007) *Indonesia – The Presence of the Past*, Berlin: Regiospectra: 341–60. A condensed version of [Chapter 4](#) has been published under the title ‘The Acehnese diaspora: hawks and doves? Conflict-support, peace-finding and political opportunity structures’, (2009) *Journal of Human Security*, 5, 3: 22–43. Parts of [Chapter 5](#) and [6](#) use material from ‘The Acehnese diaspora after the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding: Return challenges and diasporic post-conflict transformations’, (2011) *Asian Ethnicity*, 12, 2: 179–201 as well as ‘The merits of not returning: the search by Acehnese in the diaspora for political participation in post-conflict times’, (2010) *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* (RIMA), 4, 1: 111–42. The article ‘The waxing and waning of the Acehnese diaspora’s long distance politics’, *Modern Asian Studies* (forthcoming) sums up my overall argumentation.

Abbreviations and glossary

AAA	Achehnese Association in Australia
AAS	Australian Achehnese Society
ABRI	<i>Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia</i> , Indonesian Armed Forces, renamed TNI
ACA	Achehnese Community in Australia
<i>Acheh Seupakat</i>	United Aceh, business organisation
Achso	Aceh Solidarity
<i>adat</i>	customary law
AGAM	<i>Angkatan Gerakan Aceh Merdeka</i> , armed wing of the Free Aceh Movement
AI	Amnesty International
AMM	Aceh Monitoring Mission
ARCM	Achehnese Refugee Committee in Malaysia
ASAP	Action in Solidarity with Asia and the Pacific
ASC	Aceh Student Club (Penang)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASF	<i>Acehnisk Samfund Forening</i> , Acehnese Community Association (Denmark)
ASFF	<i>Acheh Sumatra Flyktninge Forening</i> , Aceh Sumatra Refugee Organisation (Norway)
ASNA	Achehnese Society in North America
ASNLF	Acheh Sumatra National Liberation Front (English name of GAM)
ATC	Aceh Trading Center (Penang)
AWTC	Aceh World Trade Centre (Kuala Lumpur)
BAIS	<i>Badan Inteligen Strategis</i> , (Armed Forces) Strategic Intelligence Agency
BAKIN	<i>Badan Koordinasi Intelijen Negara</i> , State Intelligence Coordinating Agency
<i>Bendera Merah</i>	Red Flag, Muslim secret society (Penang)
BIA	<i>Badan Intel ABRI</i> , ABRI Intelligence Body
<i>Biro Penerangan</i>	GAM information office (Kuala Lumpur)

BKPM	<i>Badan Koordinasi Penanaman Modal Daerah</i> , Regional Investment Coordinating Agency
BRA	<i>Badan Reintegrasi Aceh</i> , Agency for Reintegration in Aceh
BRR	<i>Badan Rekonstruksi dan Rehabilitasi Aceh dan Nias</i> , Agency for the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction for the Region and Community of Aceh and Nias
<i>bupati</i>	district head
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMI	Crisis Management Initiative
CoHA	Cessation of Hostilities Agreement
COSPA	Commission on Sustaining Peace in Aceh
CCP	Cambodian People's Party
<i>daerah istimewa</i>	region with special autonomy status
<i>dalang</i>	puppet master
<i>Darul Islam</i>	Abode of Islam, militant movement in Indonesia
<i>Dewan Delapan</i>	Council of Eight (Penang)
DOM	<i>Daerah Operasi Militer</i> , Military Operation Zone
DPD	<i>Dewan Perwakilan Daerah</i> , Regional Representatives Council
DPRA	<i>Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Aceh</i> , Provincial Legislature in Aceh
DPRK	<i>Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Kabupaten</i> , District and City Legislatures
DPR(RI)	<i>Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia</i> , National Legislature
FAME	Free Aceh Movement in Europe
FEER	Far Eastern Economic Review
<i>fitnah</i>	denunciation
Fretelin	<i>Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente</i> , Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor
Funcinpec	<i>Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendent, Neutre, Pacifique Et Coopératif</i> , National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia
GAM	<i>Gerakan Aceh Merdeka</i> , Free Aceh Movement
GIAS	The Government of Independent Aceh Sumatra
GPK	<i>Gerombolan Pengacau Keamanan</i> , Security Disturber Gang
<i>hajj</i>	pilgrimage to Mecca
Haji (Hj)	honorific title given to Muslims who made a pilgrimage to Mecca
HDC	Henry Dunant Center, renamed in Centre of Humanitarian Dialogue
<i>hijrah</i>	Prophet Mohammad's flight from Mecca to Medina

HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
<i>Idul Adha</i>	Islamic celebration to commemorate the obedience of Ibrahim
<i>Idul Fitri</i>	Islamic celebration at the end of the fasting month
IFA	International Forum for Aceh
IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
IMAM	<i>Ikatan Masyarakat Aceh Malaysia</i> , Association of the Acehnese Society in Malaysia
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
ISA	Internal Security Act
ISMAR	<i>Ikatan Sosial Masyarakat Aceh Rawang</i> , Social Association of the Acehnese Community in Rawang
<i>jemaah</i>	(Islamic) congregation
JSC	Joint Security Commission
<i>kampung</i>	village
<i>kapupaten</i>	regency
<i>kenduri</i>	reception, celebration
<i>ketua</i>	elder
KNIL	<i>Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger</i> , Royal Netherlands East Indies Army
KORAMIL	<i>Komando Rayon Militer</i> , subdistrict military command
KOPASSUS	<i>Komando Pasukan Khusus</i> , Army Special Force Command
KPA	<i>Komite Perahlian Aceh</i> , Transitional Committee of Aceh
KPAMD	<i>Komite Persiapan Aceh Merdeka Demokratik</i> , Preparatory Committee for a Free Democratic Aceh
LoGA	Law on Governing Aceh
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ('Tamil Tigers')
<i>Majelis Nasional</i>	GAM National Assembly
<i>Majelis Negara</i>	GAM State Assembly
<i>maulid</i>	Islamic celebration to commemorate the birthday of prophet Mohammad
<i>(me)rantau</i>	'flat coastal lands', i.e. to go overseas to study and gain experience
<i>merdeka</i>	free, independent
MKN	<i>Majelis Keselamatan Negara Malaysia</i> , National Security Council
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MBGAM	<i>Markas Besar Gerakan Aceh Merdeka Eropa</i> , headquarter of [MP]GAM
MPGAM	<i>Majelis Pemerintahan Gerakan Aceh Merdeka</i> , Government Council of the Free Aceh Movement

MSB	Malaysia Special Branch Police
<i>Negeri Seberang</i>	‘neighbouring country’, i.e. Malaysia
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NKRI	<i>Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia</i> , Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia
OPIC	Olof Palme International Center
OPM	<i>Organisasi Papua Merdeka</i> , Free Papua Organisation
PA	<i>Partai Aceh</i> , Aceh Party
PAS	<i>Parti Islam Se-Malaysia</i> , Islamic Party of Malaysia
<i>pemekaran</i>	process of dividing a province into smaller provinces
<i>pemilu</i>	<i>pemilihan umum</i> , general elections
<i>pengajian</i>	worship
PERMAS	<i>Persatuan Masyarakat Aceh Skandinavia</i> , Association of the Acehnese Community in Scandinavia
<i>pesantren</i>	Islamic boarding school
<i>pesisir</i>	‘coast’, North and East Aceh
<i>pilkada</i>	<i>pemilihan kepala daerah</i> , regional elections of local government heads
PPP	<i>Partai Persatuan Pembangunan</i> , United Development Party
PRA	<i>Partai Rakyat Aceh</i> , Aceh’s People Party
PULO	Patani United Liberation Organisation
PUSA	<i>Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh</i> , All-Aceh Union of Islamic Scholars
<i>qanun</i>	regional by-laws
RATA	Rehabilitation Action for Torture Victims in Aceh
<i>reformasi</i>	‘reformation’, i.e. post-Suharto era
RELA	<i>Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia</i> , People’s Volunteer Corps
RI	<i>Republik Indonesia</i> , Indonesian Republic
RMS	<i>Republik Maluku Selatan</i> , Republic of South Moluccas
<i>Sabena</i>	<i>Syarekat bekerja sama sekolah agama</i> , organisation for labour and religious education
SAF	<i>Svensk Atjehnisika Förening</i> , Acehnese Swedish Association
SAM	<i>Suara Aceh Merdeka</i> , Voice of Free Aceh (magazine)
SCHRA	Support Committee for Human Rights in Aceh
<i>sharia</i>	Islamic law
SIRA	<i>Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh</i> , Aceh Referendum Information Center
Suaram	<i>Suara Rakyat Malaysia</i> , Voice of the Malaysian People
Tanah Melayu	‘land of the Malays’, i.e. Malay(si)a
Tanah Rencong	‘land of the dagger’, i.e. Aceh
TARSA	Tanah Rencong Students Association
<i>tauke, tekong, toke</i>	‘business boss’, often also middlemen for migrants

<i>Tengku</i>	honorary title for Malay aristocrats
<i>Teuku</i>	honorary title for members of <i>uleebalang</i> families, Aceh's former feudal merchant class
<i>Teungku</i>	title for religious scholars in Aceh
TKI	<i>Tenaga Kerja Indonesia</i> , Indonesian Migrant Workers
TNA	<i>Tentera Neugara Aceh</i> , Aceh National Armed Forces (previously AGAM)
TNI	<i>Tentara Nasional Indonesia</i> , Indonesian Armed Forces (previously ABRI)
<i>tokoh</i>	leader
<i>ulama</i>	Islamic scholar
<i>uleebalang</i>	aristocrat
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNPO	Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation
UUPA	<i>Undang Pemerintahan Aceh</i> , Law on Governing Aceh
WAA	World Acehnese Association
<i>wali nanggroe</i>	'guardian of the state'
<i>wilayah</i>	region

Note on Indonesian and Acehnese spelling

As far as possible I have followed modern Indonesian spelling. For example, I speak of Aceh rather than Aceh. However, since the spelling also expresses a certain political stance (i.e. Aceh generally supports a position favouring independence from Indonesia), I have left quotations and names of organisations uninterfered. For simplifying matters I have abstained from using diacritical signs for terms in Acehnese.

1 Introduction

Intent, theoretical framework and methodology

The more crowded the Acehnese abroad the better it is, as [our] enemies would not be able to extinguish [our] struggle and finish off (*menghabisi*) the Acehnese.

(*The Acehnese Bulletin*, April 2004: 3)

Prologue

The very first time I met Nurdin Abdur Rahman was in Sydney in June 2006, at the *maulid* (annual celebration of the Prophet Mohammad's birth) where many Acehnese living in Australia gathered to celebrate, pray and eat Acehnese food. Nurdin, who had studied in an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*), acted as master of ceremonies, playing the drum and reciting the *Quran*. Only a few days later I met Nurdin again. Over coffee he told me about the time he was imprisoned for being suspected of supporting the separatists of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).¹ During altogether 12 years in prison he was tortured badly (*Tapol Bulletin*, March 1999). After his release in 1999, he set up the Rehabilitation Action for Torture Victims in Aceh (RATA). Nurdin visited Australia several times to campaign with non-governmental organisations and academics on Indonesian security measures in Aceh.

After the declaration of martial law in Aceh in May 2003, Nurdin decided to move to Australia, where one of his brothers was living since 1983, in order to seek political shelter and also return to his studies at university. As liaison officer in the Acehnese Association in Australia (AAA) he became an active campaigner for human rights in Aceh. When, after the devastating tsunami in December 2004, peace negotiations began between the Government of Indonesia and the exiled GAM leadership, Nurdin was part of the GAM delegation.

In April 2007, I saw Nurdin again in Kuala Lumpur. This time I met him as the director of the Aceh World Trade Centre (AWTC), which he had set up with a dozen Acehnese who had been living in Malaysia for a long time. Nurdin informed me about his plans to build commercial links between

2 Introduction

Acehnese traders on both sides of the Straits of Malacca. Within a month I met Nurdin again in Banda Aceh. At this occasion he presented himself as the official candidate for the position of *bupati* (district head) in Bireuen, North Aceh. He was considering returning to Aceh for good, because he felt that he could contribute more to Aceh's post-conflict/tsunami reconstruction from inside Aceh than from overseas. Besides, he was overwhelmed by the strong emotional requests of fellow countrymen urging him to return. In June 2007, he won the election in Bireuen.

In late October 2007, I bumped into Nurdin again at a workshop about Aceh at the Asia Centre of Harvard University, where Nurdin was one of the main speakers. In his presentation he reflected on Aceh's violent history, his personal engagement for an independent Aceh and peace, and on the failure of peace negotiations prior to the Helsinki MoU. Rather than epitomising the exiled human rights activist, religious community leader, local bureaucrat or transnational businessman, this time Nurdin appeared as a cosmopolitan political representative and scholar.

Finally in August 2008, I visited Nurdin once more in Aceh. As the ruling district head of Bireuen, he was giving an address at an exhibition of local products. After watching a number of cultural performances, we discussed the achievements and challenges of his work as district head. I was especially interested to find out to what extent he was able to utilise his diaspora experiences and his broad local, national and international networks in order to perform his duties as a local politician. Nurdin admitted that his job was very demanding; some former colleagues had withdrawn their support, while others he alleged were deliberately putting problems in his way. All of a sudden Nurdin said that 'if things go totally wrong here, I can always go back to Australia and finish my studies'.

Within three years, I had met Nurdin in three continents, in at least five different roles. For me Nurdin is – though a rather extreme example – typical of what the Acehnese diaspora *as a whole* stands for: a people of high mobility, flexibility and adaptability, who left their homeland voluntarily or not, but while away developed a strong homeland commitment that allowed them to continuously exert significant influence on Aceh from afar. In general terms, Nurdin's situation illustrates how the Acehnese diaspora was and is still engaged politically and socially in five important domains: first, in homeland-oriented long-distance politics; second, in transnational political engagement; third, in host-country oriented diasporic advocacy; fourth, in intra-community dynamics of the Acehnese living abroad; and fifth, in the politics of return to the homeland.

This book introduces many more Acehnese diasporans and their experiences, focusing on how nostalgia and the politics of (be)longing were expressed in concrete and diffuse political action during almost 30 years of armed conflict in Aceh. Grounding a great number of collectively experienced conditions outside of Aceh within the framework of diaspora explains how Acehnese related to war back home, but also how they produced shared

notions of resistance, homeland and ethno-nationalism. The analysis considers the beginning of GAM's armed rebellion as the trigger point for the diasporisation of the Acehnese abroad, which means that the making (as well as the un-making) of the Acehnese diaspora is closely related to the progression of conflict. The ongoing war generated intensive networking between Acehnese abroad that relied on political, economic, ethnic and kinship affiliations. Hence the hardship caused by the conflict resulted in strong feelings of transnational co-responsibility and solidarity among co-ethnics. Furthermore, this book also examines what happened to these people and their activism once the conflict was over.

By and large, this book advances the argument that the Acehnese diaspora had a disproportionate impact on the destiny of their fellow countrymen who remained in Aceh. In 2004, at the peak of the conflict in Aceh, more than 100,000 people lived overseas, which roughly correlated with about 2.5 per cent of Aceh's total population of about 4.2 million people. The role of the diaspora was significant both to the progress of the conflict and to its peaceful resolution. Whether the Acehnese diaspora and their diasporic long-distance politics leant more towards supporting conflict or conflict resolution is an important question dealt with at length, but not the only one. Generally this book seeks to answer the question on: how could the Acehnese abroad – although few in number – be so influential on so many back home? In doing so, it looks at Acehnese diasporic lives in different places and in between places. Particular consideration is directed at diasporans' modes of communication, procedures of decision making and ways of exercising authority. By looking at diasporans' lives, it becomes comprehensible how newly developing identities shape political commitments. It also reveals how personal and collective relationships transform over time, resulting in the formation of loyalties, pragmatist and ephemeral coalitions and even enduring feuds, which reframe the diaspora structure too. Paying attention to the processual nature of diasporas, i.e. the metamorphoses diasporas undergo, provides the broader scholarly literature on diasporas with a fresh slant.

Moreover, this book illuminates two aspects of conflicts in Indonesia that have so far largely escaped scholarly gaze: transnational linkages and the influence of diasporas. Against all risks of producing a biased image of the Aceh conflict by maybe over-emphasising diaspora impact, this book seeks to contribute another view of the Aceh conflict that might turn out to be relevant to researchers working on comparable small-scale separatist movements elsewhere, especially other secessionist conflicts in Indonesia, which have hitherto mostly been treated as purely internal affairs.

Why study long-distance impacts of the Acehnese diaspora on homeland politics? In recent times a number of excellent studies on the politics in Aceh have been published (Aspinall 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b, 2009; Sukma 2003, 2004; Reid 2006; Schulze 2003, 2004; Ross 2005; McCulloch 2003; Robinson 1998; Kell 1995; Davies 2006; Drexler 2008; Miller 2009

and others). However, none of this rapidly expanding literature concentrates on the Acehnese diaspora and its impacts on war and peace back home. This is not just a blind spot but a serious shortcoming for the reason that developments over the last 30 years cannot be explained without considering the ties between Aceh and Acehnese communities abroad. These ties helped to shape events in Aceh in crucial ways. In short, the conflict in Aceh would not have lasted almost 30 years without the Acehnese diaspora, and without them there also would not have been peace.

To be fair, some scholars (Hiorth 1986, 1991) have mentioned the role of the Acehnese diaspora in Malaysia and provided estimates on localities and numbers; however, these estimates often did not concur with my findings. At most, Acehnese overseas were mentioned and their engagement taken for granted, but barely specified. Hardly any scholar has analysed in detail how the diaspora was formed and consolidated, or how the different segments of the diaspora interacted and communicated, or how the diaspora was able to exercise impact on the homeland conflict. When it came to long-distance politics, the only centre of attention was the GAM government-in-exile in Sweden; Malaysia was reduced to a tough shelter for Acehnese refugees or to a location of a 'migrant support network' (Gunaratna 2001: 34). The logistical and personal input that supported the government-in-exile was ignored. Although most Aceh scholars knew of GAM's training camps in Libya, they missed the point that the majority of these fighters were recruited in Malaysia. Only Kirsten Schulze (2004: 5), referring to Richard Barber, pointed out that in the early 1990s the diaspora support was a main reason for the re-emergence of GAM in Aceh:

[...] its leadership was safe in exile where it continued to make its case for independence [and] a significant number of GAM members including military commanders found safe haven in neighbouring Malaysia where GAM continued to exist as an insurgent movement among the refugees and supported by the Acehnese diaspora.

(Barber 2000: 34)

In a previous study on GAM, Schulze (2003) had already mentioned different diaspora tasks in support of the separatist struggle, which included the opening of GAM offices in Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, the US and Europe; shelter for GAM fighters fleeing Aceh provided by the Malay Acehnese community and the recruitment of new fighters overseas among the refugees, as well as moral and financial backing for the separatist struggle. So far, Edward Aspinall (2009: 119) provided the most elaborate overview of Acehnese networks overseas, concentrating on GAM actors overseas, he concluded that 'the presence of a concentrated Acehnese community in Malaysia was crucial to GAM's resurrection and survival. Malaysia provided a place of refuge, a source of finances, weapons and recruits, and a window onto the wider world.'

However, most scholars primarily concentrated on the nature of the conflict inside Aceh and made only brief mention of the existence of Acehnese communities overseas. Nobody provided data on how diasporic support was organised, pooled and transferred to Aceh. Since involvement in homeland politics exercised by co-ethnics overseas does not occur automatically, it is important to investigate who supported the homeland conflict, in what form and for what reasons, and who abstained from homeland support and why. A few scholars touched on related topics such as Acehnese migration and Acehnese migrant life abroad.² There is also a number of descriptive, human rights-oriented reports about Acehnese refugees and their experiences of illegal Indonesian labour immigrants in Malaysia and forced return (*Tapol Bulletin*, April 1998; HRW 2004a; Suaram 1998, 2003, 2004). Indonesian magazines (*Tempo*, *Gatra*, *Kompas*, *Gamma*) made mention of Acehnese in Malaysia and sporadically published reports on Hasan Tiro and the Acehnese in Sweden, mostly to denigrate them. In summary, in-depth studies of the Acehnese diaspora and its relations with the homeland and the host countries are missing.

This book aims in particular to fill three gaps. First and foremost, it adds the diaspora dimension to the scholarship of the Aceh conflict. Second, it challenges the common perception that GAM was the only voice of the Acehnese abroad by exploring a range of other, non-GAM-affiliated Acehnese overseas who promoted their views on politics in Aceh. Third, since the Acehnese networks abroad did not dissolve completely after the peace agreement in August 2005, the book pays attention to the post-conflict developments of the Acehnese overseas, not only to understand general characteristics of the Acehnese diaspora better but also to throw light on broader diasporic metamorphoses, such as the oscillations of engagement that determine the politics of (be)longing.

For these purposes the book describes, analyses and interprets the long-distance politics of the Acehnese diaspora, which have influenced homeland developments in many different ways during more than the last 30 years. The role of the Acehnese diaspora was crucial to the progression of the conflict in Aceh. Putting forward a two-part argument, the book gives evidence that the conflict in Aceh would not have lasted for almost three decades without diaspora support. Yet, as the Acehnese overseas in the course of time also supported a peaceful resolution for the Aceh conflict, they also played an important role in peace finding. In order to understand the impact the Acehnese overseas were able to exercise, the advantages collective long-distance politics are able to confer must be considered.

Borrowing from Benedict Anderson (1992, 1993, 1994 and 1998), long-distance politics means all migrants' efforts to secure ties with the homeland and its population by applying modern communication technologies to shape policies there while living protected far from home. Generally speaking, long-distance politics can range from civilian and ideational forms – like raising awareness, lobbying, charity giving and developing human

resources, offering shelter to refugees, sending remittances to relatives or war victims – to military and physical forms that include financial, material and logistical help for the struggle, participation within the conflict or even involvement in terrorist acts. Long-distance politics can evolve into long-distance nationalism, a kind of patriotism nurtured by nostalgic desires to recreate a (lost) home. Nina Glick Schiller defined long-distance nationalism as:

[...] a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographic locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral home. Actions taken by long-distance nationalists on behalf of this reputed ancestral home may include voting, demonstrating, lobbying, contributing money, creating works of art, fighting, killing and dying.

(Schiller 2007: 570)

Anderson also noted that long-distance politics often lack accountability:

They [long-distance nationalists] are deeply rooted in a consciousness that his exile is self-chosen and that the nationalism he claims on E-mail is also the ground on which an embattled ethnic identity is to be fashioned in the ethnicized nation-state that he remains determined to inhabit.

(Anderson 1994: 327)

Diasporic long-distance politics, especially in regard to homeland conflict, depend on the socio-political background of the supporting diasporans as well as on the nature of the confrontation itself. In order to search systematically for explanations that explore these dimensions, this book is organised around three main research questions:

1. How did the Acehnese diaspora evolve and which factors in the homeland and in the host countries assisted the process of becoming a diaspora?
2. What were the nature and effects of long-distance politics exercised by different parts of the Acehnese diaspora towards the homeland?
3. What impacts did the end of the conflict in Aceh have on the Acehnese diaspora and its long-distance politics?

Each of these three superordinate questions gives rise to a number of further questions. When asking about the origins of the Acehnese diaspora it is not enough to search for historical origins in the form of early Acehnese migration to the Malay Peninsula and former migrants' homeland connections in the form of trade or even warfare. For the sake of exploring collective long-distance politics, it is more important to inquire how Acehnese *migrants* could become *diasporans* at a specific moment. For centuries,

Acehnese had opted for assimilation into host societies. However, at a specific point in history, Acehnese in Malaysia began to see their lives, fates and identities as inextricably linked to the homeland. What caused the Acehnese to think of themselves as a distinctive group, and how did external factors help to shape such collective identities?

Trying to answer questions about when and why the Acehnese diaspora became involved in long-distance politics the book sheds light on the conditions responsible for the mobilisation of the Acehnese living overseas. When dealing with this question Terence Lyons' conceptualisation of conflict-generated diasporas turned out to be rewarding for the case of the Acehnese overseas. Lyons (2004: 7) views the main characteristic of a conflict-generated diaspora as a violent conflict in the homeland that develops into the diaspora's 'touchstone of identity'. Due to a 'specific set of traumatic memories', conflict-generated diasporas 'hence retain symbolic ties to the homeland' and 'frequently have a prominent role in framing conflict issues and defining what is politically acceptable' (Lyons 2007: 530).

Applied to the Acehnese abroad this means that their existence *as a diaspora* was triggered by the conflict in Aceh, which was initiated by Hasan Tiro and his associates when they declared Aceh's separation from Indonesia in 1976. The causes for the outbreak of the separatist struggle can be traced back to economic dissatisfaction with central government policies as well as to Jakarta's political and cultural paternalism (Kell 1995). In the course of the confrontation, additional reasons such as revenge and lack of trust appeared (Robinson 1998). The hostilities between the GAM guerrillas and the Indonesian military (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, TNI, formerly ABRI) fluctuated over the years. Counterinsurgency measures followed each guerrilla uprising and were continued after 1998 during the so-called *era reformasi* (era of reform) under the post-Suharto governments (Aspinall 2009).

The suffering of the Acehnese overseas was two-fold. On the one hand, many had experienced violence in Aceh and therefore shared concerns about the conflict at home that affected large parts of the remaining society. On the other hand, many Acehnese also faced hardship in Malaysia, which resulted from the way they were treated there. The Acehnese in Malaysia became what Pnina Werbner (1999: 235) called a 'community of suffering'. The diasporisation of the Acehnese was stimulated by large numbers of refugees coming to Malaysia. The critical mass necessary to set off the process of becoming a diaspora was reached by drawing Acehnese migrants into the diasporic realms. Yet, diasporisation not only required quantitative expansion but also qualitative adjustments, meaning strengthened collective identities and intensified feelings of togetherness. For GAM members, many of whom sought refuge outside Aceh, the diaspora not only became a point of access to seek donations and other forms of support for their separatist struggle in Aceh from the very beginning of diasporisation, but also a means to transfer its political agenda on to the diaspora.

Hence the mechanisms that GAM applied to extract financial and other support from the wider diaspora are of particular interest.

The second part of the book deals with the effectiveness of the Acehnese diaspora in having a political impact on the homeland. It takes into account different kinds of support and sheds light on different supporters and their motivations. It also explores the diaspora's effectiveness as a political actor by evaluating the consequences of fragmentation, rivalry and discord on the Acehnese diaspora's long-distance politics. Thereby addressing the ongoing discussion about diasporas as peace-wreckers or peace-makers (e.g. Shain 2002; Østergaard-Nielsen 2006; Smith/Stares 2007) helps to situate the findings within broader debates on diasporas within political science. While most writers on diasporas and their relationships with homeland conflicts concentrate on the 'dark side of diaspora politics' (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006: 1), more recent empirical research has provided evidence of the constructive potentials of diasporas in regard to finding peace for their homelands (Calließ 2003; Zunzer 2004; Lyons 2004, 2006; Johannsen 2005; Weiss Fagen/Bump 2006). The assessment of the Acehnese diaspora and its involvement has provided evidence of both conflict and peace support. To understand how these different – apparently antithetical – forms of support related to and gave way to each other, it is worthwhile to analyse which diaspora segments were the spearheads of conflict support and/or peace support.

Like other diasporas the Acehnese diaspora never constituted a politically homogenous unit. Although GAM was the most noticeable voice within the Acehnese diaspora and its influence reached far, GAM could not embrace all segments of the diaspora. In fact, there were many who did not share GAM's ideological mindset, methods and targets, such as political and economic networks of naturalised Acehnese or Acehnese activists overseas who tried to make an impact according to their own agendas. Moreover, at times individual political affiliation fluctuated. Rather unexpectedly, when it came to conflict and peace support, it turned out that some diaspora subgroups became partly overlapping. However, this observation concurred with other research findings on diaspora long-distance politics (Skrbiš 2007; Koser 2007).

Learning that diasporic conflict and peace support are not antithetical but rather part of the same spectrum of attitudes to the homeland explains the situational nature of diaspora support. Rather than judging diasporic involvement in homeland politics in moral terms, we need to consider that diasporic decision-making regarding conflict or peace support depends on internal resources and capabilities available to the diasporic leadership and their opponents. The analysis of the Acehnese diaspora's long-distance politics employs the idea of political opportunity structures to describe strategic adaptation to changing external conditions and internal diasporic settings in order to explain the success or failure of certain actions and strategies (Kitschelt 1986). Originally, political opportunity structures referred only

to external factors that provided ‘incentives for collective action’ (Tarrow 1994: 85). Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2006: 7) remarked that ‘diasporas operate in a political national and international context, which constrains and facilitates their activities’. While many defined opportunities/constraints as independent from the diaspora’s internal capabilities, other scholars made use of political opportunity structures in a broader sense. For example Rachel Paul (2000) also included the internal conditions such as the capabilities of diaspora institutions (e.g. religious institutions) into the analysis of diaspora mobilisation. This book looks at the adjustments of diasporans to external restrictions and opportunities in the host countries and also at the strategies to cope with internal competition and challenges.

Discussing the effectiveness of impacts on homeland politics draws attention to different forms of support that were available to the Acehnese diaspora, such as financial, material, logistical, ideological and moral forms of support. Especially moral support deserves special attention. Outlining how many Acehnese back in the homeland hung their greatest hopes onto the diaspora illuminates how the so-called politics of emotions shaped the relationship between the homeland and the diaspora. In fact, I argue that these politics of emotions were the key to the diaspora’s political effectiveness: over the years Acehnese abroad – above all the GAM leadership – built up a powerful myth of their political potency. Even though the diaspora did not meet the concrete expectations of many in the homeland, the hopefulness with which many Acehnese back home viewed them remained. GAM’s convincing narrative about the righteousness of the independence struggle, and its successful procrastination strategies of suggesting that help is on the way and creating an impression of agile diplomatic manoeuvring, gave the Acehnese at home and overseas confidence that GAM would eventually prevail.

Another decisive reason for which GAM could claim the political lead within the Acehnese diaspora without having to provide greater evidence of success was the fact that no other diaspora group was able to challenge GAM’s dominance successfully. GAM defended its leadership role by reducing challenge(r)s and marginalising critics, and also by instrumentalising such internal threats against its dominant position to justify tight control over the diaspora. Taking such diaspora internal politics into consideration and identifying the issues around which internal fragmentation and competition within the diaspora occurred allows for conclusions about how authority was established and consent manufactured in the Acehnese diaspora. Moreover, doing so illuminates the centrifugal and centripetal forces that permanently affect diasporas and therefore attract diasporans into or repel them from diasporic activities.

The third part of this book focuses on the transformation of Acehnese long-distance politics after the end of the homeland conflict. The conflict had created the Acehnese diaspora in the first place and served as its main rationale for political engagement. Although there has been much research

about conflict-generated diasporas during war time (Horowitz 1986; Sheffer 1995; Cohen 1997; Shain/Sherman 1998; Skrbis 1999; Shain 2002; Collier/Hoeffler 2007; Fair 2005, 2007), there has hardly been any research done to explore what happens to a diaspora once the homeland conflict comes to an end (Turner 2008; Koinova 2007). When examining the consequences resulting from the end of the conflict on the Acehnese diaspora and their involvement in homeland politics, two field sites matter: both the homeland to which some Acehnese diasporans returned voluntarily or involuntarily and also the shrinking diaspora communities abroad in which some diasporans remained. Paying attention to both localities generates a fuller picture of translocal and also transnational dimensions of long-distance politics and their local and contextual embeddedness. Questions relevant for this context ask for factors and circumstances diasporans considered upon deciding whether to go back (or not) as well as the challenges in regard to reintegration they faced back home. Yet, at the same time it is considered worthwhile to find out what happened to the previous diasporic networks and whether these contacts can be employed as socio-political or cultural capital to win legitimacy or authority for those who try to access power in the homeland in the future. Although the end of the homeland conflict might have deprived the Acehnese diaspora of their main collective rationale for residing overseas, this does not imply that the diaspora dissolves completely or becomes irrelevant. Exploring how remaining diasporans cope with the loss of their *raison d'être* and yet justify their continued absence from home, it becomes obvious how diasporic activities are transformed to suit changing requirements back home and in situ in the first five years after the conflict. As not all Acehnese wished to return for good, but rather opted for a life of travelling between places, these people also need to be considered. Even though the numbers of those who can afford such an ultra-mobile life is limited, their impact on local post-conflict politics is extraordinary.

Diaspora as a theoretical approach to the Acehnese overseas

The question of how to theoretically grasp collective long-distance politics was one of the challenges in writing this book. Before elaborating on the advantages of applying *diaspora* rather than any other related terms for people outside their land of origin, I illustrate the intricacies of what to call the Acehnese overseas by portraying Mahmud. Mahmud, an Acehnese man in his late forties, has been living in Kuala Lumpur for almost 25 years. In the late 1980s he left Aceh just after finishing high school. At first he worked on construction sites. Later he bought a small shop; nowadays he manages several. However, Mahmud was never a purely economic migrant. After his arrival in Malaysia, GAM recruited him for military training in Libya. After 11 months there, he returned to Aceh in 1989 to fight the Indonesian military. After GAM's defeat, he went back to Malaysia. Asked about his

function within GAM, he said he was a middleman who helped uphold the connections between GAM leaders in Sweden and Aceh. He described his role as one of 'remote control'. This statement did not imply that ceasing or prolonging GAM operations depended on him, rather that he was subordinate to the GAM leadership, as becomes clearer with another metaphor he used:

My role was like being a goalkeeper; I could not just leave my position, only when the coach gave me permission. I had to be aware every second. We all had our roles. Not everybody knew my role. That allowed me to operate more effectively.

(interview, 2 April 2007, Kuala Lumpur)

And effective he was: he assisted many Acehnese refugees in Malaysia and prominent GAM members, providing them with money and logistical support. After the conflict, he took up travelling back to Aceh on a monthly basis, engaging himself in business activities and also advising local authorities on how to perform their duties. He did not want to return to Aceh for good, but he insisted that Aceh remained his homeland.

How to comprehend Mahmud's status? Is he simply an economic migrant who became politicised abroad over homeland issues, or is he a transnational migrant at home in two places? Should he be understood as a self-exiled separatist? Or is he maybe (as I argue below) a *diasporan*? When deciding on how to answer this question, it is necessary to state what determines the status of a person displaced from the homeland in the first place. Is it the reasons that caused the departure, both push factors (war, expulsion) and pull factors (economic incentives, education)? Or is the person's adjustment (isolation, assimilation, acculturation) to the new life in the host country more crucial?

Terminological trouble: labelling and conceptualising diaspora

There are a number of reasons why *diasporan* seems to be a more appropriate term to apply to Acehnese overseas like Mahmud instead of other terms that label people living away from their place of origin. Most terms draw on the causes of departure to categorise those displaced. (Economic) *migrants* make conscious decisions to leave their homeland more or less voluntarily in search of better opportunities and might return home if they wish; highly trained *expatriates* choose to go abroad to work temporarily; leaving the homeland can be self-chosen by *exiles* or forced upon them but still adds pressure on those who depart; *refugees* have to leave to secure their lives from persecution, war, extreme poverty, famine or natural disaster.³ A few scholars (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006; Skrbiš 1999) have pointed to the complexity of diaspora formation and the fluid boundaries between economic migrants and political refugees, even though the majority of the

existing migration literature keeps holding on to the strict separation of these two categories.

In the Indonesian context, there are indigenous terms for and concepts of temporary stay abroad: *merantau* and *berhijrah*. The verb *merantau* means leaving home for a certain amount of time to gather experience, learn new skills and make one's fortune.⁴ According to Mochtar Naim (1979) this phenomenon is voluntary, temporally limited and requires homecoming. Generally, it is a rather individualistic project, even if some young men leave in twos or threes or prefer to mingle with people of the same ethnic background in the host land. Among young men from the Minangkabau area (West Sumatra), but also for the Acehnese, *merantau* is a traditional custom (Siegel 1969). A second popular concept for temporary stay abroad is *hijrah*, a term whose origins date back to the times of Prophet Mohammed and his flight from Mecca to Medina. *Hijrah* is now generally understood as a temporary escape from political or religious persecution. In my interviews, Acehnese referred to both *merantau* and *hijrah*, economic migrants generally depicted themselves as *perantau* (somebody who goes to the *rantau*), whereas political activists and religious scholars used *hijrah*.

Other academic terminologies for people outside their homeland focus more on the intended length of stay: immigrants aim for permanent residence in the host country; asylum seekers intend to stay as long as necessary for safety from persecution in their homeland; guest-workers plan to stay for the length of a job contract. Transnational migrants, on the contrary, are at home in more than one nation-state, often owning two or more citizenships/passports.⁵ Status changes over time because temporal dimensions matter: temporary economic migrants might stay on, apply for permanent residence status or even become citizens. Generally, the terminology is unable to incorporate such shifts.

Among the Acehnese overseas, we find immigrants, temporary migrant-workers and refugees in Malaysia. The peak of out-migration occurred during the most severe times of the Aceh conflict, especially in the early 1990s and after the declaration of martial law in Aceh in 2003, which caused many Acehnese to become either internally displaced people or refugees. Nevertheless, the existence of Acehnese communities overseas is due to a wider range of reasons and circumstances at specific times. For example, in Malaysia there are localities known as Kampung Aceh (Hussin 1980); their original inhabitants arrived from Aceh during the Dutch–Acehnese War (1873–1913) and some of their descendants still speak Acehnese (also see [Chapter 2](#)). The number and variety of experiences of Acehnese arrival in Malaysia cannot be subsumed under any of the categories I have so far mentioned (refugee, migrant, exile, expatriate), though many individual Acehnese do fit in one or the other of the categories. It is thus suitable to opt for a more inclusive term that embraces different migrant experiences. Drawing on Nina Glick Schiller (2003), I argue that it is not the reasons *for* leaving, but rather the post-migration life and the ways

migrants cope collectively with the new situation in the host country that defines people's status vis-à-vis their co-ethnics. Notwithstanding the diversity of the Acehnese overseas, *diaspora* as a concept helps to outline some characteristics of an imagined community among people who often might not appear as a community at all.

Choosing *diaspora(n)* to label Acehnese overseas pays attention to the variety and complexity of reasons why Acehnese left Aceh. Rather than defining people according to the cause of departure or length of stay overseas, it places the emphasis on their adjustment while in the host land and in particular on the interrelations between them as co-ethnics. This does not mean that temporal dimensions and generational shifts are irrelevant, but for studying collective action and especially long-distance politics, it is obligatory to capture the relations of people who feel bonded together through networks based on their ethnic origin. *Diaspora* provides a conceptual means that allows us to do this, in the sense of Anne Raulin, Alain Medam and Michel Bruneau (quoted in Dorais 2001: 4) who remarked that 'diasporas are made out of social networks whose function is to establish and maintain relations among immigrant populations who believe that they share the same ancestry'. Diasporas' focal point is about *collective* performances and ideas. Since the Acehnese abroad established notions of group cohesion (*Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl* as Max Weber said) and mutual responsibility, they cannot be understood merely as exiles. According to Yossi Shain (1989) and James Clifford (1994) the idea of exile tends to have a rather individualistic focus.

Moreover, *diaspora* allows capturing a high degree of mobility and flexibility on the part of the subjects concerned. Acehnese who sought refuge in Malaysia at the peak of the conflict stayed close to Aceh. If conditions allowed, they could re-enter their homeland relatively easily (Hedman 2005; Nah/Bunnell 2005). Others saw Malaysia only as a limbo land, a transitional site where they would stay temporarily before moving on to more secure places in the West.⁶ According to Safran (1999: 279) diasporans perceive themselves as "sojourners" rather than permanent settlers', even though they spend a long time away from home, they do not wish to assimilate into the host country society. Rather they preserve their distinctiveness (language, traditions and customs) often in costly and time-consuming ways, instead of acculturating to the host country's 'standards' (which is of course, even if strongly desired, often easier said than done). Diasporans opt consciously to maintain bonds with the homeland and with co-ethnics in other host countries, and their (self-) isolation from the host country society reinforces such a desire. What makes diasporans different from (im)migrants is, to Safran (2005: 37), their 'refusal to relinquish their collective identities'; whereas according to Milton Esman (1986: 339) 'migrant communities may feel no compelling interest to bind them together; they may blend into the host society as individuals and cease to function as separate communities'. The special characteristic of diasporans

compared to migrants lies in the former's extraordinary sense of togetherness, shared fate and collective identity. Throughout this book it is argued that the Acehnese overseas constitute a diaspora, even though their diasporicity (understood as the quality of being a diaspora) cannot be measured quantitatively.

Diaspora schools of thought, critiques and alternatives

Many social scientists include diasporas in their intellectual agendas, as Roza Tsagarousianou attests:

[...] the number of articles and monographs focusing on the concept of 'diaspora' [...] has increased dramatically, indicating not only a widespread and growing interest in phenomena associated with it, but also the realization of the potential of the concept to serve as a theoretical tool for the advancement of qualitatively different perspectives and outlooks in the study of human migration.

(Tsagarousianou 2004: 53)

When looking back at the initial use of diaspora, until the 1970s, the term diaspora was mainly reserved for the Jewish Diaspora (always with a capital letter) and other major groups of ancient dispersed peoples, like the Armenians or the Greeks. No wonder, the etymological origin of diaspora is *dia* (Greek 'over') and *speiro* ('to sow'). For a long time these historic diasporas formed a definitional prototype. Connotations derived from their experiences were mainly negative, such as expulsion, victimisation, dispossession, persecution and trauma (Tölölyan 1996; Vertovec 1999). In other words diaspora had to do with 'people linked to political misfortunes' only (Schnapper 1999: 226). Since the 1980s, the connotations of diaspora have become less negative. Indeed, some authors viewed the term diaspora as a tool for ethnic minorities to demonstrate their cultural power and to emancipate themselves from oppressive socio-cultural normativity (Gilroy 1993, 1999a, 1999b, 2003; Hall 1990). The term's proliferation was partly because it gained more positive undertones and 'appear[ed] to share an affinity with the very values of modernity' (Schnapper 1999: 239). Since the 1990s diaspora studies have expanded even more rapidly and case studies have been conducted all over the world. Interest in diasporas has increased continuously, not only due to the growing number of such communities resulting from greater migration flows around the world, but also due to their more acknowledged role in global politics.

However, the proliferation of diaspora had negative effects, too. Not only has the increased use of the term led to blurred and imprecise meanings but, more crucially, despite intense interest in diasporas current debates still lack authoritative theorisation. For example, Rogers Brubaker (2005: 1) noted 'a veritable explosion of interest in diasporas since the late 1980s' but at the

same time identified ‘a dispersion of meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space’ to accommodate various agendas. Resulting from this ‘over-use and under-theorisation of the notion of “diaspora”’ (Vertovec 1997: 227), some scholars not only questioned the term’s usefulness, but even condemned it as a ‘definitional jungle’ and ‘methodological quagmire’ (Schiller 2003: 99). Despite certain obvious weaknesses of the diaspora terminology, its eclectic nature and the lack of theoretical authority, its strengths outweigh the weaknesses. Rather than dismissing the term completely it is worthwhile to refine *diaspora* for situational and specific usage, the main reason being that there are simply no adequate substitutes. When reviewing the huge academic literature, two major streams of thought catch one’s attention. The first stream is termed here as the *essentialist* approach, because the authors in that group tend to think of diaspora behaviour as intrinsic to displaced communities. The second stream of understanding diaspora is labelled here as the *emancipatory* approach, because the authors mentioned in this context have tried to stress positive features of being displaced (or up-rooted). Being aware that not all authors can be sorted into either one or the other school of thought, and that some of them might have refined their views in the course of time, it still proves useful to contrast the two approaches to accentuate the different underlying perspectives.

The essentialist approach

Writings subsumed under the essentialist approach refer to diasporas as groups of people who share a common, mostly unfortunate destiny of forced displacement and continuous suffering arising from their foreignness and non-assimilation. Scholars who share this view (mostly political scientists and sociologists) emphasise essential features of groups, such as ethnicity, kinship and collective destinies rather than individual experiences. They highlight especially group cohesion, uniformity of political perspectives and group activism. Nevertheless, among these scholars there is a tendency for sub-categorisation – be it temporal, causal or conditional, which tend to be rather deterministic.⁷ Before elaborating on the criticisms towards this perspective, it is important to trace briefly how analyses of diaspora by essentialist theorists have evolved over time, by outlining how debates about the definition of diaspora developed.

Walker Connor’s (1986: 16) definition, one of the first attempts to come to terms with diaspora, describes diaspora unostentatiously to be ‘that segment of a people living outside the homeland’. Often criticised, this broad definition proved unhelpful in distinguishing diaspora from similar, but different forms of dispersed populations (expatriates, expellees, refugees, alien residents, and ethnic or racial minorities). Searching for clearer criteria that differentiated diasporans from migrants, William Safran (1991: 83–84) proposed a rather strict definition consisting of six criteria that need to be

fulfilled for a group to be considered a diaspora. First, the members of the group in question or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific area of origin. Second, they retain a collective memory, which includes myths of their history, collective achievements and precise location of the homeland that they long for. Third, members of a diaspora share feelings of alienation since they do not want to be, or cannot be, fully accepted by the host society. Fourth, they therefore foster hopes of return. Fifth, there is a collective commitment among them to restore their homeland as it used to be, accompanied by expectations for prosperity and welfare should return be achieved. Sixth, they keep up individual and joint contacts with the remainders (co-ethnics back in the homeland) to feed their ethno-communal consciousness.

Robin Cohen (1996: 515) accepted most of those criteria, but complemented them with three additional factors: first, diasporas can be a voluntary expansion of a religious or ethnic group of people, which occurs in order to find work, pursue trade or even engage in colonial expansion; second, there must be an institutionalisation of a return movement and third, diasporas have distinct creative goods and values, for example in literature, music and the arts. From an empirical view, there is rarely a single diaspora that can fulfil all of either Safran's or Cohen's criteria at all times. Even parts of the Jewish Diaspora, which is considered the archetype, do not fully correspond to this ideal type (Clifford 1994: 305). Nevertheless, many subsequent studies of diasporas have benefited from this analytical framing. Safran (1999: 265) later criticised Cohen's wide-open typology, too, but rather than searching for more sophisticated criteria, he proposed instead a negative definition. According to him, a minority community that has been dispersed from its original place of residence and is marked by one of the following features is *not* considered a diaspora: first, a weak will to survive as a minority, evidenced by almost no usage of the homeland language and no collective heritage (just family recollections); second, an unclear focus on the homeland and its specific location; and finally, no myth of return and only a few impediments to adaptation to the host country. However, this suggestion was not persuasive within academic circles and is rarely referred to. Most theorists – although aware of the rigidity of the earlier ideal-typical definitions – still rely on Cohen and Safran.

Apart from the question of defining diaspora, the works from the authors mentioned above have raised some important points about the political impacts of diasporas. First and foremost they acknowledged the significant role played by diasporas as interest groups and as political actors in world politics (Esman 1986; Sheffer 1986; Vertovec 2005, 2006; Adamson/Demetriou 2007). In particular, authors have stressed the importance of the interconnectedness between homelands, host countries and diasporas ('triangular relationships'). The 'relationships with one another within, across and between borders' (Winland 2002: 709) are very complex and diaspora politics can be performed in different layers of political involvement,

including the engagement in the domestic politics in the host country, the participation in inter-local politics including regional, trans-state, and intra-diaspora activities, and also in homeland politics. Last but not least, the essentialist school of thought provided a specific vocabulary and abstract frameworks for comparative studies on diaspora politics, even though some of their generalisations should be treated with caution.

The emancipatory approach

Authors subsumed under the second school of thought originate from different political, personal and academic backgrounds. A number of them were among the key figures in post-colonial studies, cultural studies and the post-modernist (mostly literary) academic scene that challenged racist and exclusivist normativities within Western states and universities by highlighting the cultural contributions of migrants in contrast to their miserable political positions. Their intervention was motivated by a desire to promote emancipation of migrants from being so-called second class citizens within host countries. 'Deconstructing such essentialist notions' on the homogenous nature of migrant groups was their battle cry (Young 1995: 27). Instead of lamenting injustice and inequality they tried to invent new positive connotations for foreignness by indicating the merits of hybridity, so-called cut-and-paste identities, multiplicity, heterogeneity, performance and ambivalence, just to mention a sample of the post-modernist jargon they applied. Intellectual front (wo)men – James Clifford, Paul Gilroy, Arjun Appadurai, Robert Young, Avtar Brah and Stuart Hall – had a particular interest in aesthetics, literature, art, symbols, meanings, interpretation of values, self-representation, narratives of identity construction and civil rights. Adherents of this perspective avoided strict and exclusive definitions of the term diaspora and employed it to describe hybrid identity formations as well as cultural processes and practices resulting from displacement.

For them diaspora fell in the category of marginality, and most of these scholars celebrated marginality for its 'structural moral advantage' and the opportunities it offered to (re)create and (re)invent identities through hybridity (Levy 2000: 141). Avtar Brah (1996: 193) thought of diasporas as 'sites of hope and new beginnings'. Diasporic life seemed desirable for migrants because it offered ways to escape from the brutalities of daily life in states that considered migrants to be second-class citizens, but more importantly to escape from national chauvinism and 'ethnic absolutism' to use Paul Gilroy's (1993: 2) wording. Khachig Tölölyan (2000: 112) stated that 'diasporas have been idealized as open, porous, circuit based, cosmopolitan not parochial, de-territorialized, exemplary communities of the transnational moment, and therefore capable of offering – not of ascribing to or imposing upon, as nation-states do to their citizen-subjects – flexible, multiple identities'.

With regard to politics, as Dominique Schnapper (1999) pointed out, many authors fostered great hopes that diasporas (as entities that were much older than nation-states) could challenge or help even to overcome the concept of the nation-state, because trans-state connections and loyalties across borders showed the absurdity of some national boundaries. However, empirical case studies proved such hopes premature and utopian, because some diasporas in fact behave ultra-nationalistically. Several studies provided evidence of the parochial demands and goals of diaspora elites, which were far different from the cosmopolitan assumptions held by some post-modernists about diasporas. For example, Susan Pattie (1994) gave a very good account of rising nationalism and trans-state engagement in the Armenian diaspora. Deriving from her work on the Kurdish diaspora, Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2001) described an ambiguity whereby diasporas are transnational in their action, but nationalist in their targets. Post-modernists romanticised diasporicity due to their overwhelming concentration on imaginary realities. Concentrating only on the voices of diaspora it is easy to fall for the diaspora's biases. The focus of scholars subsumed in this group was often not on the actual relations with the homeland but more on the diasporans' ideas and imaginations of an original homeland. Images projected by the individual overshadowed collective action. John Lie (1995: 304) complained about the consequent over-emphasis on single voices and personal narratives rather than 'high politics', as well as the 'disregard of numbers and generalisations, abstruse theoretical terminology and endless neologisms'. William Safran's evaluation of the post-modernist contribution is even harsher:

The postmodern approach to diaspora is not very helpful, since it permits a concept to be defined in terms of an individual's own 'narrative'. To many a postmodernist, what counts is not objective reality or collective definitions but an idiosyncratic understanding and a 'mood' concerning a condition. Thus, a diaspora identity may be claimed by a person who is a member of the dominant ethnic or religious majority but who suffers from a feeling of alienation – of not being in tune with the prevailing culture and of suffering from discrimination.

(Safran 1999: 284)

Despite such genuine criticism, some of the ideas the post-modernist diaspora theorists proposed are valuable for further research. First and foremost, their analyses did not portray individuals or social groups as passive recipients of change created by overwhelming forces, but rather as active agents taking part in different kinds of transformational processes. Also, post-modernist diaspora studies did not only acknowledge heterogeneity and different role patterns within diaspora groups – there are engaged and politically active diasporans as well as less affiliated members – but they also stressed overlapping identities of individual diasporans as well as unstable

coalitions within diasporas. Without paying attention to the instability of social groups and intra-group struggles for power and resources, case studies become rigid and inauthentic. Besides, the post-modernist brought not just overt political activities into consideration, but also looked for more subtle manifestations of political beliefs and bonds.

To sum up and to make the differences between these approaches of diaspora more apparent, it might help to exaggerate the distinctions between them even more. Essentialist theorists stress group uniformity and consensus in diasporas. They tend to view them as static categories with highly integrative behaviours, expecting every individual with the same cultural, religious and national background to behave along the same lines as his or her co-ethnics. They expect diasporans to keep traditions and languages alive, to isolate themselves from their host environment and to act as a monolithic community. These perspectives imply rather deterministic notions, because ethnic identity is not a 'once-and-for-all decision' (Bertrand 2004: 95). In contrast, emancipatory diaspora approaches tend to over-stress individual experiences, disintegrative features and freedom of choice. Generally, post-modernist theorists employ diaspora more often as a metaphor than as a concept for political analysis.

Both approaches are marked by strong dispositions. Their concepts of diaspora stress either, for the essentialists, seemingly empirical realities of ethno-transnational connections, or for the emancipatists, subjective diasporic consciousness. The conceptual connections between these two aspects of diaspora experience remain weak. In Pnina Werbner's (2000: 6) words 'present theorizations of diaspora fail to engage adequately with the constitutive relations among intellectual activity, diasporic quotidian culture, subjective consciousness, and political action'. As neither of the two perspectives is convincing in itself, a combination of elements from both seems therefore more promising. Such a combined approach must pay attention to the material and organisationally embodied existence of diasporic groups and especially to their activities. It must also include the non-material realms of diasporicity expressed in transnational moral gestures, such as philanthropy, political lobbying and personal relations of kinship, marriage and economic investment. Independent from the specific shortcomings of these two streams, there are other, more generally problematic issues in diaspora theory, which should not lead to complete disapproval of the concept itself, but rather open new ways of researching, understanding and theorising diaspora as well as diaspora politics.

For assessing the political impact diasporas can have on their homelands, it is important to, first, retrace the evolution of a particular diaspora within a 'larger political and historical context' (Levy 2000: 146), and second to identify the driving factors for diaspora mobilisation. A diaspora does not arise automatically or develop *per se* from the very beginning whenever migrants enter a host country. It has to evolve over time and only if certain conditions are met. The timeframe for a diaspora

consciousness to develop, though, remains uncertain. According to Judith Shual:

A sense of diaspora can occur or reoccur after several generations when the group members are themselves no longer immigrants even though their predecessors were. A sense of diaspora is a feeling that is characterized by shifting periods of latency and activism which occur in response to processes in the three relevant referents: the group itself, the host society and the homeland.

(Shual 2000: 46)

It is important to stress that during the initial processes, and as time moves on, diasporas are not static entities. On the contrary, they constantly keep changing and transforming. This is because their composition varies as some people leave and others arrive and also, of course, due to a whole range of internal and external stimuli. Simon Turner (2008: 747) applies the metaphor of 'the waxing and waning of the political field' to describe the processual nature of diasporicity and to emphasise that diaspora is a *process of becoming* rather than a state of being. While many authors were apt to treat diasporas as 'undifferentiated wholes' (Wald/Williams 2005: 1), ahead of many, Pnina Werbner (2000: 8) viewed diasporas as voluntary social formations that produce and reproduce themselves socially, culturally and politically and that are internally rarely monolithic, but hybrid and heterogeneous. Also Floya Anthias (1998: 4) criticised the assumption about diasporas as 'a natural and unproblematic "organic" community of people without decision or difference, dedicated to the same political project(s)'. Nina Glick Schiller (2003: 108) probably had a similar thought in mind when she proposed to speak of 'transnational social fields' rather than transnational communities because the notion of community, too, adumbrates many differences concerning social and economic stratification, educational disparities, income measures and the like. In her lucid words (2003: 106): 'rather than describe a location or a political unit, the word community evokes an ideology of shared interests. The term community leaves unmarked the exploitative class relations and divisions of wealth and status that stratify a population.'

While studies of ethnic minorities long ago recognised the ever-changing conditions that define affiliation to an ethnic group, theorists of diaspora seemed to ignore altogether the impacts of class, gender, age, social status, occupation and other distinguishing factors (Skrbiš 1999). Floya Anthias (1998) and James Clifford (1994) have pointed out the importance of class relations in diaspora consciousness and involvement in transnational politics. After all, ignoring the social backgrounds of diasporans leads to analyses that fail to address power hierarchies in diasporic groups and therefore cannot fully explain different involvement in long-distance politics. So far, researchers tended to concentrate solely on diasporic elites and their

impacts on homeland politics. Viewing diaspora as a narrowly determined group highly committed to the same aims neglects the variety of standpoints that can be found in different layers of the diaspora. Ignoring them and the reasons for their passivity leads to unbalanced conclusions about the diasporas' impacts on homeland politics.

To understand diaspora politics, it is crucial to include a broader spectrum of diasporans in the analysis and to look at contacts they established with NGO activists, power brokers and mediators who are not members of the same ethnic group. Evaluating the political environment of diaspora lobbying, and the embeddedness of their political activism in that environment, allows for drawing firmer conclusions about the effectiveness of the diaspora's impact and about the role of the political opportunity structures.

A final reminder to bear in mind when studying the evolution and the political mobilisation of a diaspora in order to evaluate the impact of their action is to trace the perceptions of diasporic influence in the homeland population. Although diaspora literature often stresses the diaspora–homeland axis, this is studied from one perspective only. Not many scholars have observed how homelanders view the activities of the diaspora so far. One exception is Simon Turner (2008: 59) who has written about how 'political entrepreneurs discredit each other according to where they are located in the transnational political field'. As diaspora–homeland connections (as well as host country–diaspora connections) are two-way streets, the reactions of the people back home towards their co-ethnics abroad as well as to the returning diasporans must be included, because they present the other side of the diaspora experience.

Methodology

Critics might ask why study big themes on the basis of such a small and also relatively young diaspora like the Acehnese? Usually diaspora studies focus on much larger communities, such as the Armenians (about eight million), Somalis (about seven million) and Turks (eight million). The Acehnese diaspora consisted of an estimated 100,000 people in 2004, at the peak time of the homeland conflict; by early 2009, the numbers had halved. However, there were several practical advantages researching a relatively young and small diaspora. First of all, despite the fact that migration from Aceh to Malaysia is an old phenomenon, the evolution of the Acehnese diaspora was a recent process and therefore might be classified as an 'incipient diaspora' (Weiner 1986).⁸ Instead of having to review centuries of written diaspora histories in archives, I could research people's life stories more closely, both in temporal and spatial terms.

Given the lack of written documents on the Acehnese diaspora, the bulk of information for this book derives from interviews and participatory observations conducted in several sites where Acehnese diasporans are concentrated. Different research sites enabled comparison of Acehnese

diasporan lives and impacts on homeland politics, and permitted me to produce a more rounded picture of the so-called Acehnese diasporic microcosmos and its evolution. During my research from 2006 until 2009, I got in touch with most significant Acehnese diasporic community leaders. Over more than 14 months in the field, I carried out approximately 200 interviews, group discussions and informal chats, mainly in Indonesian, sometimes in English, with senior key figures, younger activists, second-generation immigrants, ordinary diasporans, (non-Acehnese) associated activists and, finally, recipients of diaspora politics in Aceh. Open and biographical interview approaches proved to be a suitable way of discussing more sensitive issues with informants because I was interested in life histories. Once face-to-face meetings had taken place, I tried to revisit selected informants and I kept contact by phone and email. Modern telecommunication was a helpful way of maintaining contact after having moved onto a new field site.

Moving from one fieldwork site to another was part of a deliberate research plan. In fact, to find out about the interconnectedness of diasporans, which is based on their high degrees of spatial mobility and discontinuity, I decided to become a researcher *on the move*. Focusing on diasporic interaction and networking across borders also required leaving behind traditional limits of fieldwork. My research field was thus not defined by one geographic entity but composed of different territorial sites. This method rested on the assumption that these diasporic sites were mutually linked through cohesive diasporic structures. Therefore my research was not only meant to be multi-local but local. To anthropologists this approach is known as multi-sited fieldwork or transnational ethnography (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992; Marcus 1995; Welz 1998; Hannerz 2000; Kokot 2002). Critical anthropologists have challenged concepts of mobile ethnology. Ulf Hannerz (2000), for example, asked whether it is possible to meet the standards of ethnographic fieldwork, meaning deep involvement with the field, when studying several sites and hence giving limited amounts of time to each. The main risk in multi-sited fieldwork is that if the researcher is unable to become integrated into one site for a long time, (s)he might become overwhelmed by the variety of places, peoples and problems, which thus can lead to more breadth than depth in the research outcome. Yet to pretend that the world stands still while one explores a manageable site is no adequate solution either. In times, in which mobility and flexibility are components of people's lives, searchers must adapt their methodologies. Rather than getting distracted by divergences between sites, my research focused on interconnectedness and comparability. Even if the fieldwork sites were far away from each other, it was the people in the field who kept them close. A cluster of guiding questions enabled me to 'compare people, places and problems in a sensible and reasonable way' (Welz 1998: 188). In fact, my frequent travels made me more empathetic to the experiences of my informants, such as their crossing borders, adapting to new environments

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