

THE NATURE OF OTTOMAN-
ACHEH RELATIONS IN THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES:
COMMERCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND MILITARY CONNECTIONS

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Introduction

In the field of Ottoman history a prominent place is occupied by studies that deal with its influence on its immediate neighbors. These effects can be seen on Western and Eastern Europe, the countries bordering the Mediterranean, Black and Caspian seas, the Middle East and the Red Sea area. Ottoman activities and influence in the Indian Ocean and the regions that gravitate toward it have not been treated as extensively. As a field of study, there has not been much concentration on Ottoman influence upon the Muslims of Southeast Asia. Even more striking in twenty first-century scholarship is the relative neglect of research into the pre-eighteenth-century period of both Ottoman and Southeast Asian history in general and into the relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Sultanate of Aceh in particular. Information is retrieved mainly from Ottoman and Malay chronicles.

From a historiographical point of view, a sizeable portion of Malay chronicles consist of amusing and entertaining, non-historical material. This makes it difficult for an historian who wishes to use these sources as documented facts on which to write an accurate history of the Ottoman influence in Sumatra or of the history of Aceh with the Ottomans. For this reason it is almost impossible to rely solely on Malay sources. Their writers did not adhere to accurate chronology of events and were not always willing to separate legend and myth from truth. Nevertheless from these sources, when studied together with Ottoman and other Western sources, we manage to get a clearer picture of the historiography of Malay history in general, and of the relationship between the Acehnesse sultanate with the Ottoman Empire. This essay discusses the nature of the relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Sultanate of Aceh,

during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This study refers to, first, an article by Anthony Reid entitled "Sixteenth Century Turkish Influence in Western Indonesia,"¹ which deals with the diplomatic relations between the Ottoman Empire and Aceh. Reid uses several Malay and Indonesian chronicles as the primary basis for his presentation of the facts leading to the conclusion that the Ottomans had diplomatic and military relations with the Sultanate of Aceh. First, he makes it clear that Raja "Rum," i.e., the Ottoman Sultan, was mentioned in Malay chronicles. Many tales were written about relations between Aceh's sultans with the Ottomans. The second work referred to is that of William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra*. He discusses in detail the fact that the sultans of several Sumatran kingdoms assumed titles and royal seals which were also used by the Emperor of China and the Ottoman sultan. They were regarded as "brothers" by the Malay ruling elite.² Thus, the Sultan of Minangkabau believed that he was the youngest brother of the Emperor of China and the Ottoman Sultan. This belief was derived from the universally-diffused legends which associated origins of local kingships with the empire of Alexander the Great (Iskandar Dzul Karnain). The third example, the most famous Malay epic narrative *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, is a story of the courage and endurance, the exploits and adventures of Hang Tuah who went on a number of missions for the Sultan of Malacca.³ He was sent to the kingdom of Majapahit on a goodwill mission which was very well received. After this visit, the Sultan sent him to China where he was also received well by the Emperor. He fought the Portuguese off the coast of China before returning to Malacca.⁴ Historians find this source useful and accurate when it relates Hang Tuah's visit to Istanbul (Rum) to buy cannons for Malacca. From other sources as well, we know that cannons were bought by the Acheneese to ward

¹ *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol 10, No. 3, (Dec. 1969).

² Dr. Sharifah Munirah Alatas, *National University of Malaysia*, 3rd edition, (London, 1811; reprinted Kuala Lumpur, 1966), 3.

³ *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 2nd Edition (Balai Pustaka, *Batavia*, 1948). For further insight into this material, see Kassim bin Ahmad, *Characterization in Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, *Kuala Lumpur*, 1966).

⁴ *Ibid*, 57.