

The Lived Experience of a Non-Muslim Chinese in Indonesia's Sharia-Regulated Province of Aceh: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This study aims to picture intergroup relationships between Muslim Acehnese and non-Muslim Chinese communities in the Peunayong-regulated province Aceh, Indonesia. A descriptive phenomenological case study methodology was employed to examine the lived experiences of a particular group of people, and at the same time to explore a particular place in Aceh called Peunayong or Chinatown, and the life of its communities. The qualitative research approach was employed in collecting the data through observations, personal interviews, and documents analysis. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with one Muslim Acehnese and one non-Muslim Chinese who have been living for a long period in the Peunayong district. Three main themes were merged and discussed in the findings, namely: (a) Peunayong as the symbol of tolerance; (b) non-Muslim and the Sharia law; and (c) discrimination in the Sharia law. In general, despite the implementation of Sharia law, Aceh has been seen as tolerant since Islamic law is limited only to the Muslim population. The portrait of harmony, tolerance, and peace in social-civic between Muslim Acehnese and Non-Muslim Chinese can be witnessed around Peunayong district, either activity related to trading or business, mores, and culture. Meanwhile, this study suggests that the implementation of Sharia law in Aceh should not only achieve the popular name of "The Veranda of Mecca" or as a symbol and a name, or for political purposes, but its implementation should provide a welfare impact to local communities including Muslim and non-Muslim alliances, also to support religious freedom and solidarity between religious communities.

Keywords: Sharia law, Aceh, Chinese, Muslim, Minority.

A. Introduction

Aceh is the only province in Indonesia that legally implemented *Sharia law*. As the most populous Muslim province and the first part of spreading Islam in *Nusantara* (Indonesia), the *Peunayong* has been a way of life for Acehnese, traditionally and culturally. We can observe that all cultural practices in Aceh are Islamic, although some of the cultures are influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism which has been practiced before Islam arrived. With special autonomy legislation, the *Sharia law* in this province is not only regulating cases of marriage, divorce, and inheritance, but also a punishment under the Islamic *Sharia law* such as caning for the crime of gambling, adultery, consuming alcohol, rapping, and or dating.¹

For Acehnese, they believed that its law has been implemented over a long period, before the declaration of Indonesian independent day on August 17, 1945. According to history, the role of Islamic religious courts has been long practiced in Aceh during the period of Sultan or the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam.² Zainuddin (1957) also notices that a very phenomenal history is the death punishment by Sultan Iskandar Muda to his own adored son *Meurah Peupok*, who was found guilty of adultery. After Aceh became a part of Indonesia, their relation (i.e., Aceh and Indonesia) was unstable due to a lack of attention from the Indonesian government related to the demand for autonomy policies.³ Acehnese demands have the right to apply autonomy policies more broadly in the fields of religion, education, and customary law (*adat*). However, this demand was refused by the central government and finally produced the rebellion of the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) seeking independence from the government of Indonesia.⁴

¹ Michelle Ann Miller, *The role of Islamic law (Sharia) in post-tsunami reconstruction. Post-disaster reconstruction: lessons from Aceh* (Earthscan: London, 2010), P. 29-60.

² Peter Gregory Riddell, *Aceh in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: 'Serambi Mekkah' and identity.* "Verandah of Violence: The background to the Aceh problem (Singapore University Press: Singapore, 2006), p. 45.

³ H. M. Zainuddin, *Singa Atjeh!: Biographi seri Sulthan Iskandar Muda.* (Pustaka Iskandar Muda: Medan, 1957), p. 3-8.

⁴ Michelle Ann Miller, *The conflict in Aceh. Accord: an international review of peace initiatives* (Conciliation Resources: London, 2008), p. 12-15.

After a couple of decades of conflict and war between the free Aceh movement and the Indonesian government, in 2005 after the tsunami disaster with an estimated 230,000 people died, Aceh became peace under a memorandum of understanding signed in Helsinki. The deal between the rebel and the government was finally achieved and Indonesia imposed special autonomy status on Aceh, including the *Sharia law* according to the law number 18/2001.⁵ The *Sharia* now is officially implemented in Aceh and since 2005 and the *Peunayong* police officially known as "*Wilayatul Hisbah*" began operating to socialize Islamic law and control certain types of crimes that specifically violate *Peunayong*, such as alcohol, prostitution, and gambling.

According to its definition, *Sharia law* is the religious law directing and governing Muslim followers with Islamic regulation. This regulation includes many aspects related to day-to-day human life, including economics, politics, social welfare, education, business, law, worship, and other social issues. It also covers personal matters such as marriage, sexual etiquette, divorce, hygiene, eating, *halal* food, voluntary charity, and other everyday etiquette.⁶ Spencer (2005) also states that *Peunayong* is also described as the system and principles that govern the Muslim behaviors and their interactions with others including non-Muslim in the social context.⁷

One of the most important issues discussed during the implementation of *Sharia law* is discrimination against the non-Muslim minority. According to statistical data released by the Indonesia National Statistics Bureau in 2010, the number of Muslims in Aceh is 98.19%, followed by Protestantism 1.12%, Catholicism (0,07%), Hinduism (0,003%), Buddhism (0,16%), and Confucianism (0,0008%). On the one hand, Onishi (2009) notices that the regulation of *Sharia law* has discriminated against non-Muslim

⁵ M. Y. Aiyub Kadir (2012), Negotiating Aceh self-determination in Indonesia's unitary system: A Study on Peace Agreement Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding 2005, *Aceh International Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 63-76.

⁶ Toni Johnson & Mohammed Aly Sergie (2014), Islam: governing under Sharia, *Council on Foreign Relations*, p. 25.

⁷ Robert Spencer, (Ed), *The myth of Islamic tolerance: how Islamic law treats non-Muslims*. (Prometheus Books: New York, 2005), p. 23-35.

minorities and contravened the country's constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion⁸. Another also mentions that because of the *Sharia law*, the relationship between local Muslim and non-Muslims in Aceh has been severed⁹. On the other hand, others claim that non-Muslim minorities in Aceh are not feeling discriminated against and are equally capable of living peacefully and tolerantly.¹⁰

Therefore, based on this polemic, we believe that there is a need to conduct comprehensive research investigating in-depth information about this issue. Additionally, as the majority of the non-Muslim community in Aceh was Chinese people who live in *Peunayong* district or so-called China town, therefore, this study focused on this particular group and place. Thus, this study attempted to answer the question: How do the interactions between the Acehnese Muslim-majority and the Chinese Non-Muslim-minority in the *Peunayong*-regulated province?

B. Methodology

A descriptive phenomenological case study was employed in this study. Phenomenologists aim to explore the lived experiences of a particular group of people in the context of the worlds in which they live.¹¹ Therefore, in collecting the data, phenomenological interviews were conducted from one Muslim Acehnese and one Non-Muslim Chinese who have been living for a long period in *the Peunayong* district. These interviews were conducted to explore their experiences and in-depth perceptions toward the relationship of Muslims and Non-Muslim around *Peunayong* and opinions about the implementation of *Sharia* law. Furthermore, a case study aims to explore a real-life of a bounded system, investigating a particular community and place in Aceh. The qualitative research approach was

⁸ Norimitsu Onishi, Extremism spreads across Indonesian penal code, (*New York Times*, October 27, 2009), p.27.

⁹ Robert Spencer, (Ed), *The myth of Islamic*, p. 39.

¹⁰ Marzuki Abubakar, Chinese in Shari'a Territory: Ethnic and Religion Harmonization in Banda Aceh-Indonesia, *Academic Research International*, Vol. 6 No. 6, p. 78

¹¹ Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological research methods*. (Sage Publication: NY, USA, 1994), P. 85

employed in collecting the data through observations and document analysis. We observed Acehnese and Chinese interactions and daily activities around *the Peunayong* district for four months (February - May 2019). Furthermore, document analyses were employed to support the data in terms of historical perspectives and discussions.

The observations and interviews were conducted in *Peunayong* district, the central market in the middle of Banda Aceh city offering a range of products of food and clothing, including fresh fish, vegetables, cooking ingredients, and other kitchen equipment. *Peunayong* is commonly known as China town in Aceh where most Chinese communities have been living as traders and entrepreneurs. This district becomes a part of the economic machine in Aceh. According to Usman (2009), the Chinese community has lived in *Peunayong* since the 9th century and most of them work as traders. He also mentioned that the relationship of Aceh and Chinese has been established since the 5th century and continued to a bureaucratic relationship in the 13th century¹².

Hence, *Peunayong* district has become a big Chinese trading area in Banda Aceh and until today they have lived permanently in this area as traders. Most of the Chinese people lived in trading areas or markets and shophouses. In this study, we observed how people in this area interact in daily lives, particularly the interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim people, or between Acehnese and Chinese. The observation was conducted continuously during four months periods (February - May 2019).

Furthermore, the interview discussions were conducted on August 28, 2019, and the duration was fifty minutes for both Muslim and non-Muslim interviewees. We employed semi-structured interview questions consisted several important questions related to the objective of the study. The names of the two informants were kept anonymous and labeled as interviewees 1 and 2. Furthermore, a thematic analysis approach was used for the analysis of the data.

¹² Abdul Rani Usman, *Etnis Cina Perantauan di Aceh*, (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia: Jakarta, 2009), p. 43.

C. Findings

The researcher began to write a textual description of the themes or phenomena that had been identified as critical features of the relationship between Acehnese and Chinese around *the Peunayong* district. Both positive and negative responses experienced by individuals were reported from the interviews and observation. The findings were captured in three main themes comprising (a) *Peunayong* as the symbol of tolerance; (b) non-Muslim and the *Sharia* law; and (c) discrimination in the *Sharia* law. The following section describes each of the themes and related sub-themes.

Peunayong as the symbol of tolerance

Based on the document analysis, *Peunayong* is mentioned as an old town area established by the Dutch colonial regime as a Chinatown and recently declared as the symbol of diversity or diversity village in Banda Aceh city. Besides a majority of the Chinese community, a wide diversity of other ethnics also lives here, including Acehnese, Javanese, and Indian (Abubakar, 2015). The religious diversity can also be observed from the existence of the four long-standing churches, namely the *Hati Kudus* Catholic church, Western Indonesian Protestant church (GPIB), Methodist church, and the *Batak* Protestant Church (HKBP). We can also find four *Vihara* (Buddhist temples) around the city, namely *Dharma Bhakti*, *Vihara Maitri*, *Vihara Dwi Samudera* and *Vihara Sakyamuni*. These religious houses are frequently used for every worship time and celebrating a great day.

The portrait of harmony, tolerance, and peace in social-civic can be witnessed in daily activity, either activity related to trading or business, mores, and culture. In the social context of trading, for example, all communities from different religions and ethnicities gather in *Peunayong* every day for numerous activities such as trading, sipping, drinking coffee, and everything in between. Chinese respect Acehnese very well in daily intercommunication and so do Aceh people respect the Chinese. The very interesting image can be seen in the coffee shop, the most favorite place in Aceh to relax and do some activities like dealing with a business, politics, or more

academics. In *Peunayong*, we can easily observe Acehnese drink coffee together with Chinese and discuss any topic related to daily life, business, or just a joke. Almost all Chinese also speak fluent Acehnese in a good dialect. Old women Muslim or non-Muslim Chinese women sell various vegetables together in the street vendors around *Peunayong*, and they speak and communicate harmoniously as well as help each other.

In terms of culture, the Chinese New Year celebration becomes a very interesting season with many performances such as *Barongsai* (dragon dance) and a Chinese costume parade. Interestingly, some of *Barongsai*'s members are young Muslim women wearing veils. During the celebration of Chinese New Year, we also can witness hundreds of people including local Muslim communities crowding the attraction of lion dance and costume parade of Chinese legend characters in *Peunayong* district. At the same time, it also shows that most of the Chinese young women dress in Acehnese costumes and perform Aceh dance on several celebration days. Addressing this issue, interviewee 1 notices:

"Social interaction is quite well organized between Muslims and non-Muslims here, and non-Muslims have great respect for Muslim people. Chinese and Acehnese look like a family in Peunayong. We never classify that you are a Chinese or I am Acehnese, you are a non-Muslim or I am a Muslim, no...All of us who have been living here for years and were born here are called Acehnese. We respect each other, during the celebration of Chinese New Year, all people are involved in succeeding this agenda, so do the Chinese people involved in helping Muslim Acehnese during the celebration of Islamic days. This is Peunayong, a peaceful and tolerant village, and we will say to the world, this is the symbol of tolerance in the world".

In terms of religious freedom, interviewee 2 acknowledged that the non-Muslim community could practice their worships without any discrimination from local Acehnese, a typical response was:

"Although Aceh applies Islamic law, we are free to conduct worship at temples or churches, free to celebrate lunar New Year. During the celebration of the Chinese New Year, for example, hundreds of Chinese people pray in all four monasteries in Banda Aceh. We burn incense in several Vihara. We celebrate Christmas and there is no fear, this is

because Acehnese appreciates the difference and respects each other, I have lived here for more than 40 years".

A symbol of peace and tolerance could also be observed during the Christmas celebration, the song of Christmas could easily be heard from the church in *the Peunayong* district. When asked about a sensitive political issue in Jakarta about the racism of a Chinese governor candidate Ahok (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama), interviewee 2 as a Chinese non-Muslim was more likely to keep silent and shortly responded "no comment". Furthermore, he simply explained that he would prefer to only focus on his business rather than political issues and he noted:

"We can live in harmony by doing a good business without involving in political practice and we will support any governor-elect in Aceh or Indonesian president, as long as we have a right as other Acehnese to do a business or worship in our beliefs".

Also, inconsiderable information was attained when asking about the issue of politics in Aceh. From the findings, we can assume that *Peunayong* district has long become the symbol of tolerance for Chinese and Acehnese in terms of business, social interaction, religious practice, and culture, but not in terms of politics as a sensitive issue for the Chinese ethnic. This also can be implied that most Chinese-Indonesians, particularly in Aceh, still regard politics as a taboo matter. On this note, documents of anti-Chinese during the old regime of President Soeharto (Coppel, 2008) and the discrimination and violence against people of Chinese descent in Indonesia (Harff and Gurr, 1988), have been recorded where most of them were targeted due to suspected ties to the Indonesian Communist Party. These are examples of recorded political consequences that Chinese people endure when they get involved in politics.

Non-Muslim and the Sharia law

This section discusses related sub-themes associated with a non-Muslim and the *Sharia* law in Aceh province, based on in-depth interviews data and analysis from two participants.

1. Mutual respect

Interviewee 1 mentioned that to respect Muslims in Aceh does not mean that non-Muslims must wear *hijab* (headscarves). Despite the implementation of *Sharia* law, Aceh has been seen as tolerant as Islamic law is limited only to the Muslim population. Also, non-Muslims found guilty of committing crimes can choose whether to be punished by caning under *Sharia* law or by incarceration under the country's criminal code. While interviewee 2 noticed that the implementation of *Sharia* law does not discriminate against the non-Muslim community as this regulation is fundamentally designed for Muslim communities. He illustrated this in the following verbatim statement:

"As a non-Muslim minority, we do not feel discriminated, the Sharia law is designed and practiced by Muslims, we always appreciate and respect this regulation. The regulation is for the Muslim community, so we don't feel worried about this. Meanwhile, we should always respect their regulations because we live as a minority and maintain harmony among Acehnese.... because we are also Acehnese. We have great respect for the Islamic law in Aceh and no discrimination against us. We do not need to wear the veil-like Muslim women.... But of course, all non-Muslims here should dress properly to respect the local culture and the Shari'a Law".

He also noticed about respecting Ramadhan month, where all people close their shops and follow the regulation set by the local government. The same interviewee continues:

"We also respect the Islamic law during fasting Ramadhan.....we respect our Muslim neighbors who are fasting, for example, non-Muslim people in this area are not selling food and drink during the day in a public area. We always appreciate and respect Muslims in Aceh. during Jum'ah [Friday] praying, we also close the shop. You know, we have lived here for many generations, born and raised here, and have practiced this tolerance for many decades".

The fact shows that during Ramadhan month, most non-Muslims also participated in selling various kinds of foods for breakfasting and this brings a profit for their business. During Ramadhan, some Chinese restaurants are also crowded by the Muslim

community for the *iftar* activity (Ramadhan breakfasting) *in the afternoon*.

2. Non-Muslim students in education

When asked about how their children engage in education, interviewee 2 stated:

“We don’t feel discriminated in education; my daughter can study at one of the general schools and has a good friendship with Muslim students”.

Interviewee 1 stated that not only do non-Muslim students’ study in public schools which are dominated by Muslim students but some Muslim teachers also work in non-Muslim schools.

“Many Muslim Acehnese also works as teachers in a Christian school....it proves how tolerance people in Aceh”.

It can be concluded from the interviews that non-Muslim students in Banda Aceh can get a school like other majority Muslim students. They could study at general School and interact with Muslim students. During the class hours, non-Muslim students are allowed to not follow the Islamic religion subject and they can choose whether to stay in the class, library or do other activities outside the class.

However, non-Muslim students are asked to take a religious subject examination from their theologians such as the pastor. Besides, in general school, non-Muslim students may also study at the Christian Methodical foundation school and Budhi Dharma Catholic foundation school where most students here are Christian, Catholic, Buddhist, and Hindu, as well as Muslim.

3. Discriminations in the Sharia law

Although non-Muslim are not discriminated against by the *Sharia* law, some opinions and recommendations were proposed by informants, particularly for the stakeholders in ruling the law. Here we discuss some related sub-themes associated with the opinions regarding the implementation of *Sharia* law in Aceh province.

a. Law inequality between rich and poor communities

The two interviewees mentioned that the *Sharia* law in Aceh only focuses on the lower-class communities and women, and is not comprehensively implemented for all people including upper-class communities. Those who are close to or relative to the stakeholders are not being punished when violating the law. So, it shows the gap or inequality between the rich and poor people in implementing the *Sharia* law. Interviewee 1 indicated his opinion as follows:

"I agree with the implementation of Sharia law in Aceh, but it should be implemented appropriately, so that it can provide protection and security for all people, including a non-Muslim minority, and especially poor people. So, the Sharia should also be implemented for those who are close to the stakeholders. But those who have much money and are close to the government are not being punished when breaking the law. Everyone knows this case. For example, an Acehnese figure got caught up with a prostitute but is not being punished until today. So, it is not fair".

While informant 2 gave the following comments:

"I never see or read the newspaper that rich people who break the Sharia law are also being punished; I believe that people who break this law are not only poor or common people like us but also upper-class people. So, they should also be punished. Then, the regulation should not just target the women but also men, it should be equal".

b. Corruption and the Sharia law

One of the interviewees mentioned that although the *Sharia* law is implemented in Aceh, it does not cover bigger cases like a corruption issue. He stated:

"The Sharia law is still applied to certain types of crimes that specifically violate the Sharia, such as alcohol, prostitution, and gambling, but not for corruptors. This is not fair and I believe that this statement is not only representing my opinion, but also all Acehnese opinions. I believe that all Acehnese agree that the corruptors should be caned in front of public gathering".

Another interviewee also mentioned the following statements:

“The implementation of Sharia law should be fair and comprehensively implemented in all sectors. How can a corruptor who steals trillions of money unpunished with this law, this can create a negative perception of the Sharia law itself? Caning the corruptor in front of the public gathering will make them shy and become a warning to other corruptors”.

These responses are in coherence with a statement released by Transparency International Indonesia's youth program coordinator regarding the Corruption and *Sharia* law in Aceh:

“Sharia law emphasizes morality and the body. It's not used to fight corruption. Take, for instance, the [regulation] that bans women from straddling motorcycles or the cutting off of a thief's hand. They do not apply Sharia to cases of corruption, and instead still use the anti-corruption law for corruption cases”. (Jakarta Globe 2015)

Although *Sharia* law has been implemented for a long period the number of corruptions in Aceh is still high. A coordinator of Aceh's People's Movement Against Corruption (GeRAK) declared as follows:

“In terms of corruption, Aceh is followed by oil-rich province Riau with potential losses of around Rp. 708 billion”. (Jakarta Globe 2015)

Similarly, the advocacy coordinator at the Indonesian Forum for Budget Transparency (FITRA) also reported:

“Findings of budget irregularities in the provincial level in Aceh reached Rp 7.4 trillion with 331 cases, while budget irregularities on the district and city level in Aceh reached Rp 2.9 trillion with 2,068 cases”. (Jakarta Globe 2015)

c. Daytime food sales prohibition during Ramadhan

Another sub-theme mentioned by interviewee 2 was about daytime food sales prohibition during Ramadhan for Non-Muslims. All people in Aceh are forbidden to sell food during the daytime of the Ramadhan month when Muslims fast or are not allowed to eat from *fajr* (time before sunrise) to sunset. They should follow the rule from 5 is to 3 pm. Interviewee 2 stated that most non-Muslim people opposed the sales ban and complained that even food stalls with signs

indicating they would not sell to Muslims during the daytime had to close. He indicated his opinion as follows:

“Several years ago, the government did not prohibit the non-Muslim food traders from operating their business, especially in the Chinese community area, Penang. This regulation is just currently designed and we expect that a mayor of Banda Aceh wishes to redesign this regulation for the non-Muslim community. We will follow the regulation such as prohibiting selling food to Muslims and the shop must be close to the public area. Actually, during the Ramadhan month, we expect that we can sell food to non-Muslims only and not to Muslims, the government can punish us if we sell food to Muslim people, we also will prohibit Muslims to buy food in our shop”.

While a Muslim interview 1 also declared his opinion as follows:

“I think during the Ramadhan month, the stakeholder should give non-Muslim people a dispensation to sell food among them but not in a public area. The government should set a special regulation for non-Muslim people. The government can give a little exemption, like they can sell food to a non-Muslim only and must prohibit Muslim to buy food in their shops, or should be sold the food in a close shop and write a sign ‘for non-Muslim only’”.

D. Discussion

Despite the implementation of *Sharia* law, Aceh has been seen as tolerant because the Islamic law is implemented only to the Muslim community. The findings describe that *Peunayong* district has become the symbol of diversity in Aceh and declared as a diverse village, where the image of harmony in social-civic can be witnessed in every activity, either the activity related to trading, social communication, religious practice, or culture. Muslim and non-Muslim communities in this area are highly supportive of religious pluralism and a harmonious society.

However, the issue of politics, locally or nationally, is still a sensitive and taboo topic for the Chinese community. In this study, interviewee 2 was reluctant to express an in-depth opinion about this issue. Recorded documents show that during the New Order (1966 –

1998), the Indonesian Government treated the Chinese differently; they were isolated and had limited access to politics. The refusal of the Chinese continued in Aceh during the long conflict between the separatist Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian Government.¹³ Besides, the discrimination and violence against Chinese descent in Indonesia have been recorded since the old regime, where most of them were targeted due to suspected ties to the Indonesian Communist Party.¹⁴

After the New Order of Soeharto's regime, particularly during the presidential era of Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur (1999-2001), Indonesians-Chinese has a right in political practice. Abdurrahman Wahid designated Kwik Kian Gie, as a Minister of Finance.¹⁵ Subsequently, politics becomes a right for the Chinese Indonesian and everything seemed "fine and harmony" on the surface until Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok, an Indonesia-Chinese, declared his bid for a candidate of the governor of Jakarta. This sensitive issue was followed by a statement made by Ahok regarding the Quranic verse *Al-Maidah* 51 in terms of choosing the leader. Finally, The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) reported Ahok for alleged blasphemy of Islam.

Based on these cases, therefore, we assume that most Indonesians-Chinese, particularly interviewee 2 in this study was reluctant to express an in-depth opinion regarding the political issues in Aceh and Indonesia. Besides, most of them were still traumatized with the case of May 1998, where most of them were particularly targeted in the protests for attacks that committed acts of brutality, torching, looting, and rape.¹⁶

¹³ Haryo Winarso & Cut Dewi, Urban heritage conservation in Aceh, Indonesia: conserving *Peunayong* for tourism, *Asian Journal on Hospitality and Tourism*, Vol. 9 No. 1, p. 15.

¹⁴ Barbara Harff, & Ted Robert Gurr, Toward an empirical theory of genocides and politicides: Identification and measurement of cases since 1945. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32 No. 3. p. 359

¹⁵ Ian Storey, *ASEAN and the Rise of China*, (Routledge: New York, NY, 2013), p. 43

¹⁶ Purdey, Jemma, *Anti-Chinese Violence and Transitions in Indonesia: June 1998–October 1999*. (ISEAS Publishing: Singapore, 2005), p. 14.

In terms of implementing the *Sharia* law, some positive and negative statements from the interviewees were also reported. On the one hand, a non-Muslim interviewee noticed that he put high respect for the *Sharia* law as its regulation is particularly designed and practiced by the local Muslim community in Aceh. A non-Muslim who breaks the *Sharia* such as gambling can choose to be punished under *Sharia* law or by incarceration under the country's criminal code. Meanwhile, the non-Muslim communities may show their respect toward this regulation. For example, dressing properly based on the local culture, closing the shops during *Jum'ah* (Friday) praying, or daytime of *Ramadhan* month.

On the other hand, although they live without any discrimination, some negative opinions were also reported. One of the interviewees mentioned the inequality of the implementation of the *Sharia law* between the rich and poor communities. The implementation of this Law only focuses on the lower-class communities and women. It seems that it is not implemented not comprehensively to include upper-class societies. It is in coherence with a study published by Milallos (2007) that the most common targets of implementing the *Sharia law* in Aceh are teenagers, young couples, and women, and not comprehensively executed all significant sectors of the community.¹⁷

In this case, those who are families with the stakeholder are not being punished when violating the law. Besides, *Sharia law* is not used to punish criminal corruption cases. The report mentions that the number of corruptions in Aceh is still high and there is no correlation between the *Sharia law* and the decrease of corruption rates in Aceh. In line with this issue, the previous study has noticed and recommended implementing the *Sharia* law in the government sectors, especially as a means to punish the corruptors. According to Milallos (2007), 'it must also be succeeding in managing other areas of government as well. However, in reality, issues of corruption in public offices have yet to be substantially addressed' (p. 298)¹⁸. From

¹⁷ Maria Teresa Millo, Muslim veil as politics: political autonomy, women and Syariah Islam in Aceh, *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 1 No. 3, p. 289.

¹⁸ *Ibid...*p.298

this report, we can assume that *Sharia* law is still applied to certain types of crimes, such as alcohol, prostitution, or gambling. But, for some reason, it does not cover a bigger crime like corruption, murdering and raping. This means that *Sharia* law only affects a particular case and class of the citizens.

Furthermore, in terms of daytime food sales prohibition during the Ramadhan month, non-Muslim people in *Peunayong* hope that the Banda Aceh stakeholders wish to redesign a special regulation for the non-Muslim community as they need to earn money and continue life during Ramadhan month, by selling foods to only non-Muslim communities and not to do so in public areas.

E. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study can be summarized that the implementation of the *Sharia* law cannot be described as already in an optimal peak. There are still a lot of duties that should be executed by the stakeholders. Today, *Sharia* law focuses on criminal cases or punishments, but not on educating people to behave properly based on Islamic regulation. Through this study, we have to note that many people, including Muslims, still misunderstand the concept of *Sharia* law. Most people recognize *Sharia* as the rule affiliated with punishments such as death by stoning or a hand amputation. Therefore, the stakeholders including *Ulama* (Islamic scholar) need to inform and educate people about the understanding of realizing a comprehensive *Sharia* law.

We have to note that the core element of *Sharia* law is peace. Islam is to bring peace and welfare to the entire world and people. *Sharia* law should not focus only on criminal aspects, but also comprehensively on all sectors such as economics, business, social welfare services, education, and government. Shadiqin (2010) mentions that the design and implementation of the *Sharia* law in Aceh should overcome several problems such as illegal logging, corruption, violence, robbery, poverty, education, and health issues.¹⁹ Additionally, the *Sharia* law should educate Aceh people on how to respect their parents, to be kind to their neighbors, to respect other

¹⁹ Sehat Ihsan Shadiqin, (2010). Islam dalam Masyarakat Kosmopolit: Relevankah Syariat Islam Aceh untuk Masyarakat Modern? *Kontekstualita*, Vol. 25 No. 1, p. 23.

ethnics and religions, to be always truthful, to keep their word, to be honest in all affairs, and not to be a corruptor, to keep clean and not to throw the rubbish anywhere, and so on. So, this regulation should be a way of life and practiced in all sectors including humanity and tolerance between majority and minority and not just a symbol.

Aceh Government should guarantee religious freedom, harmony between religious communities in Aceh, and does not discriminate against any religion and ethnicity. *Sharia* should educate Acehnese on the principle of treating other people justly and without any discrimination. For non-Muslims, they can choose whether to be punished under *Sharia* law or the regular Indonesian criminal code. It is in coherence with the national legal system in the Republic of Indonesia as mentioned in Article 129 of Law No. 11 of 2006.

We expect that the implementation of the *Sharia* law in Aceh is not only to achieve the popular name of “The Veranda of Mecca” or as a symbol and a name, or for political purposes, but its implementation should provide a welfare impact to local communities including Muslim and non-Muslim alliances, also to support religious freedom and solidarity between religious communities.

The last but not least, as this study only identified perceptions of two participants who have been living for a long period or permanently in *Peunayong*, the findings or responses could not be generalized to other districts or participants, as well as another non-Muslim ethnic in Aceh or Indonesia. Therefore, further studies are recommended to in-depth investigate such a phenomenon by selecting more participants (interviews) from non-Muslim people to avoid biased interpretation. It is also recommended to adjust a sample of both men and women equally, to avoid gender bias. Finally, further studies should also investigate Chinese perceptions about the politics in Aceh, or the interaction between Chinese-Acehnese and political issues in Aceh and Indonesia.

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