



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Understanding the Conflict in Aceh through Primordialism, Ethno-symbolism, and Constructionism

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Abstract

This study examines the conflict between Aceh and Indonesia through the lens of three theoretical perspectives: primordialism, ethno-nationalism, and constructivism. Using video collections from the Journeyman Pictures YouTube channel, the research analyzes visual narratives of the conflict, including human rights abuses, natural resource exploitation, and political struggles. While it was initially expected that one theory would be more dominant, the findings reveal an interconnection between these perspectives. Primordialism is the most evident in the videos, as Acehnese identity is portrayed as distinct from the rest of Indonesia, reinforced by grievances over economic injustice and military oppression. Ethno-nationalist and constructivist elements are also present, particularly in framing Aceh's resistance as a response to territorial nationalism. The study highlights the role of elite persuasion in Aceh's integration into Indonesia, reinforcing constructivist arguments that nationalism is socially constructed. Additionally, the research underscores the significant impact of human rights abuses on prolonging the conflict. A more comprehensive analysis incorporating additional sources, such as videos from the AP Archive YouTube channel, is recommended as it could provide further insights into the conflict's complexity. By integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Aceh's struggle and broader discussions on nationalism, conflict, and reconciliation.

Keywords: Aceh, Conflicts, Primordialism, Ethno-symbolism, Constructionism

Introduction

*Jirhom geutanyoe deungoen bajoe
Tarhoem jih deungoen nuga
Jirhom geutanyoe dengan tumpoe
Tarhoem jih deungoen bada*

Meaning:

*If they throw us with a nail
Throw them with a hammer
If they throw us with a tumpoe (a traditional fried cake)
Throw them with a bada (fried banana)*

The verse above is an example of *hadith maja*, a traditional Acehnese proverb passed down through generations. This ancestral inheritance is not related to religion but represents a set of beliefs that consists of rules and regulations as social standards in Acehnese life (Harun, 2009). It follows a distinct rhyming pattern, where the first line rhymes with the third and the second line with the fourth. It is sometimes referred to as *narit maja*, a revered form of oral art in Acehnese culture (Bakar et al. 1985 in Harun 2009). The *hadith maja* above illustrates the Acehnese mindset regarding how one should respond to actions directed at them. In Acehnese custom, throwing objects at someone is unacceptable; it is considered an invitation to a fight. So, the response is expected to be stronger than the initial action. To be noted: nail, hammer, *tumpoe*, and *bada* should not be understood literally. For instance, *tumpoe* can symbolize

harsh criticism, backstabbing, or anything that might offend or provoke someone (Harun, 2009). The *hadith maja* above reflects the Acehnese resilience and their refusal to remain silent when their rights are violated, which contributed to the persistence of the conflict in Aceh for decades.

In addition, the resilience character of Acehnese was also described by Paul VanT Veer in his Dutch-language book *Atjeh-Oorlof* (1969). Veer mentioned that over 40 years in battle, the war between the Dutch and Aceh (1870 -1942) was the most challenging in Dutch history. It claimed the lives of many of the Dutch's highest commanders (Veer, 1985). Historically, after successfully conquering other regions that now are parts of the Republic of Indonesia, the Dutch struggled to defeat Aceh. The Dutch also sent a scholar named C. Snouck Hurgronje, who immersed himself in Acehnese society to better understand Acehnese. His observations and experiences later formed the basis of his 1893 ethnographic work *De Atjehers*, 2 (Hurgronje, 1985). However, this study does not focus on analyzing the characteristics of Acehnese as Hurgronje did.

This study analyzes scenes of videos published by the Journeyman YouTube Channel related to the Republic of Indonesia (RI) and the Aceh conflict, particularly the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM), or the Free Aceh Movement and its demand for independence. Indeed, this study aims to determine whether we can understand the rooted causes of the conflict from the videos by linking them with the theories used by scholars to understand the causes of conflict, which are Primordialism, Ethno-symbolism, and Constructionism. This study seeks to answer the questions, such as how evidence where ethnic symbols such as *hadith maja* that shape Aceh ethno-nationalists' character are portrayed as the leading cause of the Aceh conflict. Or whether we will see in the videos how the conflict is merely fueled by politicians who see the benefits of Aceh's independence.

Methods

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This research explores the conflict in Aceh through the lens of Journeyman Pictures, a company that claims to produce factual content in documentary videos (Journeyman Pictures, n.d.). For example, how does the following voice-over from the video "Indonesian Atrocities as Aceh Rebels Strive for Independence (2002)" help explain the conflict?: "For 26 years, Acehese have preferred to die fighting than call themselves Indonesians," as it mentions 26 years, it could be that the video was recorded in 2001, before the peace agreement between Aceh and Indonesia in 2005. This method is called digital media research. More than 20 videos related to Aceh are on their YouTube channel. There are 13 videos about the Aceh conflict. Three videos are omitted to be analyzed for this research as there are copied contents, as noted in the table below:

Table 1. List of Journeyman Pictures Videos Analyzed

No	Title	Note
1	The Ethnic Cleansing in Aceh That Nobody Knows	The content of the video is the same as that of: "Aceh Man's Made Disaster" on the same channel.
2	Aceh's Bitter Battle for Independence from Indonesia (2000)	The content of this video is the same as that of: "The Indonesian Region in an Endless Spiral of Violence" on the same channel.
3	Aceh Separatists Suppressed By Indonesian Military (2002)	-
4	Indonesian Atrocities as Aceh Rebels Strive for Independence (2002)	-
5	Behind Rebel lines in Devastated Aceh	-
6	Indonesia Propaganda Problem 2003	The content of this video is the same as that of: "What is the Indonesian Army trying to Hide?" on the same channel.
7	Aceh Rebels after the flood – Indonesia	-
8	The Beginning of the End – Indonesia	-
9	The Tsumani War – Indonesia	The title may contain a typo, as it is written as 'The Tsumani War' instead of 'The Tsunami War'.
10	The Indonesian Army's Battle with Democracy	-

Moreover, for this research, the scenes on the videos will be analyzed and categorized to understand the conflict and answer the research question of which theory helps us understand the conflict in Aceh: Primordialism, ethno-symbolism, or constructionism.

Literature Review

Aceh is a special region in Indonesia with a unique historical and political status. Often referred to as "the verandah of Mecca." It historically served as the departure point for Southeast Asian pilgrims traveling for hajj and was the most significant Muslim power in the region (Reid, 2014). Before the tsunami, Aceh was largely closed to foreigners, and journalists were prohibited from quoting or publishing pro-GAM reports. While much of Indonesia was under Dutch colonization for

nearly 350 years until gaining independence in 1945, Aceh was not. Aceh never surrendered to colonial rule, although the Dutch captured the last Acehese Sultan on January 10, 1903. Armed resistance continued until the Dutch withdrew their troops in 1942, after 40 years of battles (Talsya 1982; Veer 1985; Barter 2008).

The Dutch left Aceh before Japanese troops arrived (Veer 1985; Reid 2014). Meanwhile, when Japan arrived, Acehese leaders started to trust the Japanese Government and cooperated against the Dutch. Nevertheless, since Japan was in Aceh, the socio-economic life in Aceh has worsened. Therefore, Acehese elites organized movements against Japan and joined forces in resistance to fight against Japan between 1942 and 1945. Acehese youths enthusiastically celebrated the Indonesian Proclamation of Independence by raising Indonesian flags in public areas and government offices (Alfian et al., 1982). In 1948, at the Indonesian President's request, the Acehese donated two Dakota Airplanes to the Indonesian Government, marking a significant contribution to national aviation, which became the Indonesian government's first airplane. However, the relationship between RI and Aceh has been tumultuous. In September 1953, Indonesia's government revoked Aceh's autonomy agreement after just three years, sparking bloody protests (Aisyah et al., 2008). This protest was led by Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII) in Aceh and was supported by most Acehese (Aisyah et al. 2008). Resolving the conflict has proven to be challenging. However, in 1961, one by one, DI/TII leaders were successfully persuaded to surrender (Aisyah et al. 2008).

Aceh experienced a period of relative peace for several years. However, in 1976, tensions resurfaced when GAM protested against Indonesian rule (Martinkus, 2004). Kadir (2018) states hostilities escalated further due to the Indonesian Government's violation of Aceh's autonomy. Estimates of the total casualties during the three-decade conflict are reported from above 15,000 to 50,000, as mentioned in Barron, Rahmant, and Nugroho (2015); Kadir (2018); Shea 2016). While GAM emerged as a successor to DI/TII. Aspinall (2007) argues that the two movements pursued different political intentions; DI/TII sought to establish an Islamic state within Indonesia, whereas GAM aimed for Aceh's independence.

However, on December 26, 2004, an unpredicted giant tsunami struck Aceh. Lee-Koo (2012) argues that the tsunami was a catalyst for the Indonesia and Aceh peace agreement that was then signed in Helsinki, Finland, on August 15, 2005 (Kadir, 2018); (Shea, 2016).

However, the Aceh local government laws must still comply with the national law. The key national legislation guiding local Aceh law is the national law No.11/2006 about the Aceh Government. It grants Aceh the authority to establish regulations for the implementation of Shariah Islam. Additionally, it stipulates that Aceh's Government share income from natural resources with the Indonesian Government. This law also refers to the national law No. 33/2004 on sharing income. Interestingly, the comparison between the 2004 and 2006 laws reveals a 0.5 % reduction in Aceh's share income from natural gas and crude oil. Below is the list outlining the income sharing between the local Aceh governments and the Indonesian government, based on the laws:

Table 2. Aceh's Share of Natural Resource Revenue (%)

Income sources	National law UU No.33/2004	National Law UU No.11/2006
Property tax	90	90
Fee for the acquisition of building rights	80	80
Forest Tenure Fee	80	80
General mining	80	80
Fishery	80	80
Liquefied Natural	30.5	30

Gas (LNG).		
Crude oil/petroleum	15.5	15
Geothermal	80	80

This slight percentage reduction might be vital; as Barter (2008) mentioned, many researchers link the LNG and petroleum in Aceh and the causes of the conflict. Although Barter (2008) doubts that people's anger might be equal in the districts where the resources are not produced, he argues that Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) or the Free Aceh Movement resented the exploitation of the natural resources by the Indonesian Government.

Moreover, news continues to surface about the dissatisfaction of former GAM members toward the implementation of the MoU. For example, Malik Mahmud Al-haytar, the *wali nanggroe* (a leader of Wali Nanggroe Institution), on August 14, 2020, stated that he and some other GAM leaders, as the representatives of GAM, met the Indonesian President, Joko Widodo, in February 2020 (Serambi on TV, 2020). This meeting was intended to discuss aspects of the MoU Helsinki that remained unimplemented after 15 years of its signing (Serambi on TV, 2020). However, at the same time, Al Haytar also acknowledged that some progress had been made since the agreement (Serambi on TV 2020). He stated that Aceh is now a peaceful place for all people, including tourists and investors.

Findings and Discussion

This study explores the causes of the conflict in Aceh through the theoretical lenses of primordialism, ethno-symbolism, and constructionism by analyzing scenes from the Journeyman Pictures video collections. Some of the videos analyzed could have been secretly recorded by reporters, while some were taken by local journalists and amateurs.

Moreover, this study focuses on the cause of the conflict between the Indonesian government and GAM; before analyzing the videos, this study starts by exploring the roots of how Aceh integrated into Indonesia. Kratoska & Batson (1993) argue that the recognition of Indonesia's independence is more based on territorial nationalism that was politically and territorially created by the Dutch. In addition, they state that there could be ethnic nationalisms that favored having their own state and other groups who might not be interested in nationalism or independence but demanded social and religious reforms. The DI/TII movement could be one example of an ethnic nationalism group that demanded more Islamist formation. There could be an argument that the Dutch have mistakenly placed Aceh as part of Indonesia. However, Aisyah, Suhani, and Chaidar (2008) contend that Aceh's integration into Indonesia was voluntary after persuasion by the Indonesian nationalist, the first Indonesian president Sukarno.

The Indonesian nationalism introduced by Sukarno has established the country with the national credo of unity in diversity. This establishment has not been easy for Aceh, as the conflict killed many Acehnese, which led Aceh to be an unsecured place to live for many decades. Meanwhile, as stated by Renan (2018 p.258); "Unity is always achieved brutally," this quote is relevant to Indonesia's situation, where complaints received armed answers from the Indonesian government. Besides Aceh, there are other conflicts in Indonesia between the national government and local armed groups, including the case in East Timor and West Papua.

In Indonesia's early history of Indonesia, all protestors were categorized as rebels of the nation. The Indonesian government labelled the DI/TII movements "rebellions," which actually started in West Java and later spread to several other provinces in Indonesia, including Aceh (Aisyah et al., 2008).

Meanwhile, the separatist movement in East Timor has set its independence from the Indonesian Government since 2002. East Timor is now an independent country called Timor Leste (Wallenfeldt, n.d.). Aceh experienced a similar struggle; however, one year after the East Timor independence, Aceh

faced a bitter conflict when the Indonesian government imposed martial law in Aceh, the reason for imposing the law was that Indonesian nationalists argued Aceh as an integral part of Indonesia.

Aceh is listed in Indonesia's history books as one of the largest kingdoms in Indonesian history. Meanwhile, the declaration of the Indonesian language by Indonesian youth as the national language in 1928 did not record the involvement of Acehnese youths at that time. More than 500 languages in Indonesia; language might not be a barrier that differentiates Aceh from the rest of the nations, while in Aceh itself, there are eight other ethnicities and speaking languages, which are Gayo, Tamiang, Simeulue, Kluet, Alas, Singkel, Jamee, and Haloban (Harun, 2009). There is also an assumption that the Acehnese originally were from the Khmer with Chamic speaking language (now Cambodia) due to the similarity of vocabulary (Harun, 2009). Similarly, Sidwell (2005) mentioned that many scholars noted that although separated geographically, the Acehnese and the Chamic languages form a genetic sub-grouping. Meanwhile, Acehnese itself believes in a long history as the central international merchants; they are descendants of mixed of various ethnicities in the world (Harun, 2009).

Similarly, in discussing nationalism and political identity in South East Asia, Reid (2010) argues that Aceh had no significant contact with Java, where the capital of Indonesia is now located. Instead, its International connections were extended to Turkey, the Malay states of the Peninsula, Sumatra, India, and the Middle East, all of which influenced the elements in the Acehnese society. During the connections, many Arabs and Gujarati-Indians settled in Aceh, shaping its social life and fostering cultural ties that were closer to Arabian and Indian than other Indonesian regions. It has shaped their identity (Reid, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, the end of the conflict between RI and GAM dealt with discussing the sharing income of natural resources. For Aceh, the significant gap in the sharing income from natural resources that disadvantaged the region where the valuable resources are could cause the conflict. This argument by Gourevitch (1979) could be applicable in understanding the conflict between RI and GAM. However, it is still debatable. Aspinnall (2007) argues that the principle of GAM for independence was secular-nationalist, considered the construction and differentiation of nationalist identity, in this paper is called ethno-symbolism. Barter (2008) believes that although the GAM stated that the main causal factor of conflict is related to natural resource exploitation and the sovereignty of Aceh; however, he argues the primary reason for the conflict in Aceh is human rights abuses. Meanwhile, McCarthy (2007) agrees that natural resources are not a primary reason for the conflict. Still, he considers it could not be separated from other causal factors: identity, resource entitlement, and human rights.

Barter (2008) believes GAM leaders have not generated their ethno-nationalism in explaining their movements; they also did not claim anything related to religious purposes, like other earlier struggles. Agreeing with the author, primordialism, and ethno-symbolism could not be the only theories that could be used in defining the conflict. Coakley (2013) states that primordialism is sociobiological, something that people own when they are born. Coakley (2013) explains that sociobiological is not only genetics but also includes language, religion, territory, and kinship. Therefore, in this research, the causes of conflict due to the unfair sharing of income from natural resources will be included in this approach.

On the other hand, ethno-symbolism is related to ethnicity but is not biological. It emerges from efforts to cope with modernity problems that result in symbols, myths, memories, values, and traditions (Coakley, 2013). With a long history of external contact, the Acehnese includes descendants of transnational marriages. The assimilations of culture may results from merchants and traders who stayed in Aceh and merged with local populations. Harun (2009) claims that Acehnese is everyone living in Aceh for generations and are from various ethnicities and intermarriages of merchants and traders. This unique biological background and cultural identity fosters

a sense of distinctiveness from the rest of Indonesia, aligning with ethno-symbolist theory.

Meanwhile, constructionism is more about the idea of nationalism socially constructed by the elites (Coakley, 2013). Alfian et al. (1982) describes the elites in Aceh in four groups: local government leaders (aristocrats), religious leaders, youth, and minority elites. The minority elites were newcomers; their number was much smaller than the other local groups. Alfian et al. (1982) argue that there were differences in political interests between elites, especially Acehnese aristocrats, that emerged right after the Indonesian Independence ignited internal conflicts.

Meanwhile, regarding the Journeyman YouTube videos; the reporters of the Journeyman Pictures videos seem to have risked their lives in producing the videos. Some of the videos were published by different broadcasting channels. However, for this paper, all videos are from the Journeyman Pictures YouTube channel. The videos show some parts of the war before the tsunami, and many videos focus on delivering tortured prisoners and the killing of civilians by the Indonesian armies. There are also depict journalists' difficulties in gathering information and were restricted to write news that could give a positive impression of the GAM. The video "Indonesia Propaganda Problem 2003" (Journeyman Pictures 2019b) shows how journalists have to promise to publish news in favor of the Indonesian government for the reason of nationalism. In addition to that, the video titled "The Ethnic Cleansing in Aceh That Nobody Knows" (Journeyman Pictures, 2016a), specifically, mention the restriction to foreign journalists and the ignorance of international to Aceh case (Journeyman Pictures, 2016a):

"In the mid-2003, martial law was declared in Aceh. And all foreign journalists and aid workers were banned from the province. Journalists were forbidden from even speaking to GAM. The recent opening up of Aceh to international relief operations has provided a rare opportunity to find out what's been going on while the world has looked the other way. The international community barely protested the isolation of Aceh. And the all-out attacks by the Indonesian military GAM want to know why the world ignored Aceh plight."

However, videos show that human rights abuses are not only after the implementation of martial law. Some videos dated earlier show torture towards prisoners and civilians. The video titled "Indonesian Atrocities as Aceh Rebels Strive for Independence" (Journeyman Pictures 2019c), presents some graphics scenes showing how the Indonesian army killed and tortured civilians. Meanwhile, the video, titled "The Beginning of the End" (Journeyman Pictures 2007), presents the main reasons why villagers join GAM, which is due to their loss of family members killed by the Indonesian armies, including during the tragedy that is known as the Simpang KKA incident.

The Simpang KKA incident on May 3, 1999, was one of many tragedies during the Aceh conflict where numerous civilians died at the hands of the Indonesian armies. This tragedy was mentioned several times in the analyzed videos. It was recorded in an amateur video, that, according to Journeyman Pictures, (2016a) could serve as evidence of human rights abuses by the Indonesian military during the conflict in Aceh. However, the Indonesian army continued to deny the allegations, claiming self-defense. The scene of the Simpang KKA tragedy can be seen in the videos titled: "Aceh's Bitter Battle for Independence from Indonesia (2000)" (Journeyman Pictures, 2018), and "The Indonesian Region in an Endless Spiral of Violence" (Journeyman Pictures, 2008). The footage shows men and women, as well as children in their parents' arms or alone, desperately fleeing for their lives while the Indonesian armies open fire towards them. Many are shot, and then the troops are seen checking whether the bodies lying on the ground are still alive.

At the beginning of the scenes of the video titled "Aceh's Bitter Battle for Independence from Indonesia (2000)", it is written on the screen that the video was also broadcasted by ABC Australia in April 2000, titled "The Trouble with Aceh April 2000". In that video, after the scene of the Simpang KKA tragedy, the video shows the reporter interviewing Rosita Noer, the Head of the National Independent Commission for Human Rights Abuses Investigations in Aceh. She explains in that meeting:

"murders and rapes have become almost the daily routine of some groups of my own country's citizens that sometimes make me ashamed to be a human being, to live in a better position than those of my sisters and brothers."

She is then showing some data and photos about human rights abuses in Aceh. She mentions some cases, including the Simpang KKA case and the case that she had investigated further about the killing of a religious teacher, Teugku Bantaqiah, and his students. At the end of the meeting with the reporter, she states that she and the commission had interviewed the Indonesian army general responsible for the murders, but the general just then disappeared, so the case is stagnant.

Meanwhile, the GAM is depicted as receiving support from villagers in some videos. For example, in "Aceh Separatists Suppressed by Indonesian Military (2002)" (Journeyman Pictures 2019a) and in "The Indonesian Army's Battle with Democracy (1999)" (Journeyman Pictures 2016b), where several scenes show GAM members, some of them are armed, mingling with villagers, Men, women, and children in the scenes can be seen listening to the speech with enthusiasm.

Moreover, the Aceh conflict situation was also worsened by corruption and bribery in the Indonesian police department in Aceh, which disadvantaged Acehnese. Maybe the policemen did not realize that the reporter, John Martinkus, of the video titled "The Ethnic Cleansing in Aceh that Nobody Knows About" (Journeyman Pictures 2016a) recorded overall scenes night when the group of policemen conducted checkpoints along a road in Aceh. A voice-over stated: "The Indonesian police department is one of the most corrupt institutions in the country." Then, the video showing a car was taken by policemen because it did not meet the requirement of motorist's papers. Then, the policemen used the vehicle to have fun; the reporter joined the policemen, who then went to a local disco with that car.

The video, titled "The Ethnic Cleansing in Aceh that Nobody Knows," depicts a meeting between the reporter and an Indonesian army headquarters official following the breakdown of the ceasefire agreement post-tsunami. The official tells the reporter that GAM often attacked the humanitarian aid convoys. Then, he also mentions some incidents and the dates that he argues as their reasons for attacking GAM. The reporter used the dates and the convoy group data mentioned by the officials to investigate further. However, the reporter states in the next scene that no evidence could be found that makes him convinced of the violation from the GAM side. Then, a voice-over:

"In the course of its so-called defensive operations, its spokesman claims the game fighters have been killed trying to disrupt the aid effort. International relief organizations contacted by dateline reported no attacks on their personnel or convoys, and I was unable to find a single media report that verified any of these incidents. GAM commanders deny any of the attacks occurred." (Journeyman Pictures, 2016a)

Therefore, for violations of ceasefires by the Indonesian army, the reporters reported evidence that the Indonesian

military continues killing civilians, including a student named Dodi Surya. He was shot by the Indonesian army, in front of his mother and villagers three days after the tsunami.

Before this study began, it was assumed that one of the theories would help the most to understand the causes of conflict in Aceh. In contrast to what Harun (2009) states that hadith maja is often mentioned in formal and informal conversations or speeches of Acehese government/organization officials. However, it is not presented in any of the videos. The presentation of traditions and ideology is also very limited, thus, ethno-symbolism is not presented enough in those ten videos. However, the feeling of suppression and not being part of Indonesian is more evident. Including, as Dahlawi, a GAM sympathizer and businessman, who appears in the video **"The Beginning of the End – Indonesia,"** states that Acehese has lost their dignity because it was taken away by Java- Indonesia, and he suggests Aceh should reclaim it back through a referendum; Dahlawi's point of views, "dignity" refer to the wealth derived from natural resources.

In addition, a GAM's platoon commander interviewed by the reporter in the video titled **"Indonesian Atrocities as Aceh Rebels Strive for Independence (2002)"** states and translated by a reporter:

"We want to be free, we want to be independent, and we do not want to be occupied by Indonesia; he says it is in matters of injustice, human rights, economy, all these things, we just do not want to be part of them we don't feel part of them, and we are prepared to take any risk even if we have to die for our dignity and for the people of Aceh" (Journeyman Pictures, 2019b).

From this scene, no conclusion can be made as to which theory could explain it. Everything is showing in the video. From economic to human rights as well as identity. However, the reporter, focusing more on the natural resources by stating **"they say Indonesia stole their lands of the richest they want them back, whatever the cost"** (Journeyman Pictures, 2019b). That statement infers the sentiments of the Acehese resistances as being deeply tied to economic exploitation and resource control.

In addition, when the issue of referendum arises in the video, **"Aceh Separatists Suppressed by Indonesian Military (2002),"** the voice-over suggests would be useless because Indonesia would still not allow Aceh to choose independence, as below:

"Just over two years ago close to one million Acehese gathered in the Provincial capital, Banda Aceh, to call for a referendum on independence after decades of suffering under Indonesian rule, a clear majority of Acehese want out, but after watching his Timor break away, Indonesia is determined not to lose Aceh. The result at least 1700 people mostly civilians, have been killed in the last year alone."(Journeyman Pictures, 2019a)

Moreover, the videos also rarely show Acehese politicians speaking, making it difficult to find evidence that constructionism theory could help explain the cause of conflict in Aceh. Regarding East Timor's independence, the GAM's highest commander at that time, **Abdullah Syafi'i**, enthusiastically encouraged GAM followers to believe that next would be the time for Aceh's independence. He believed the sovereignty of Indonesia would disappear. However, as Syafi'i and other GAM leaders appear in the videos, none suggest the link of the cause of the conflict and constructionism.

Most of the videos might bring to conclusion that primordialism could help us understand how natural resources become the main cause of the conflict and is the main issue mentioned by the reporters of videos. Including, in video titled **"The Indonesian Army's Battle with Democracy"** (Journeyman

Pictures, 2016b), where the reporter highlights what mentioning by a GAM commander, Ismail Syahputra:

"Aceh is rich in natural gas and other resources but in little worth has reached ordinary people that's one reason so many have wanted to turn their backs on Indonesia, however, independence wasn't on their carts" (Journeyman Pictures, 2019b).

In addition, the reporter argues the natural resources in Aceh have caused Acehese dissatisfied with the shared income that continues grievances. However, Aspinall (2007) and Barter (2008) argue that natural resources played an insignificant role in the conflict promoted by GAM, as the focus is more on independence.

In addition, there are violations of human rights by Indonesian troops who guarded the company Exxon Mobile, an American Company that extracting the LNG in Aceh. In **"Indonesian Atrocities as Aceh Rebels Strive for Independence (2002)"** (Journeyman Pictures, 2019b), Exxon Mobile is under investigation of Aceh local lawyers due to violations of human rights conducted by the troops who guarded the company. They had filed a lawsuit against Exxon Mobile that had employs three thousand soldiers to guard the complex of this lucrative company that had done nothing to halt troops from killing, torturing, and raping local villagers. The company, against this allegation that led the GAM, had managed to kill half of the troops' members, mentioned in **"Indonesian Atrocities as Aceh Rebels Strive for Independence (2002)"**. Then, a voice-over in the video stated that this company had led America on the Indonesian government's side to deal with the income than them to the GAM.

Muharram, one of the GAM commanders, appears in the video titled **"The Ethnic Cleansing in Aceh that Nobody Knows About."** He asks the reporter: **"Why has the world turned its back on the Aceh conflict? Why don't countries with veto power impose sanctions on Indonesia, even though they know abuses here are happening?"** he then answered his own questions, suggesting it is because the world did not aware of what happened in Aceh before the tsunami, as Indonesia has restricted foreign access to Aceh. Therefore, he hopes that after the conflict becomes widely known, Acehese will receive justice. Meanwhile, the Amnesty International Organization (2004) and KONTRAS (2016) reported that many cases of human rights abuses in Aceh have remained unsolved.

Conclusion

The findings are beyond expectation. It was expected that one of the theories: primordialism, ethno-nationalism, or constructionism, would help the most to understand the conflict in Aceh. But, it is not that simple to separate between these three theories. These theories are connected, and some scenes of the videos could represent more than one theory. However, as this study focuses on the video collections of the Journeyman Picture YouTube channel, it does cover all the conflict sequences. Still, the scenes about human rights abuses in the videos are more intense than the Aceh nationalists' speeches about the conflict or other discussions related to the causes of conflict.

According to Barter (2008), human rights abuses are the leading causes of conflict in Aceh. Lee-Koo (2012) is also concerned with human rights abuses in Aceh during the conflict, which she argues was hidden by Indonesian authorities by restricting researchers, media, and humanitarian organizations. Similarly, the videos also show the difficulties of journalists, researchers, and humanitarian aid in contacting GAM and journalists were also required to write news that did not disadvantage the Indonesian government. Amnesty International Organization (2004) found out that investigations of human rights abuses in Aceh were risky. The International organization, including Amnesty International, was not allowed to investigate, and local human rights workers also faced prison sentences.

It is difficult to separate the three theories in the videos; however, primordialism appears to be most prevalent. The Acehese sees themselves as distinct from the rest of Indonesia and believes they are suppressed by the Indonesian military. The most common discussion surrounding injustice treatment in sharing natural resources income, where the land is degraded while the poverty remains high. Although limited, the connection between Islam and the conflict in Aceh is also mentioned in the videos. For example, in the video titled "The Beginning of the End? Indonesia" Syafii, GAM highest commander, makes a statement that is simultaneously translated by voice-over:

"We, the young generation of today Aceh, will heal our nation, which has been martyred under the acts of imperialist, colonialist Java. Our struggle for independence means we no longer be part of colonial state, so are we now ready to fight faithfully like martyrs for an Islamic Acehese nation?" (Journeyman Pictures, 2007).

More than fifty women gathered around him responded with enthusiasm, shouting, "Ready!" Then, Syafii called out, "Freedom!" to which the women echoed, "Freedom." It is interesting to note that Syafii mentions "Islamic Acehese nation," suggesting a potential religious framing of the struggle in front of women audiences who might also were GAM members as some of them were holding guns. Moreover, Barter (2008) suggests GAM members who join Aceh local political party, needs to keep the party unified for their political diplomacy because there is a national party that focuses on religious matter that could threaten GAM in political Aceh, as he sees the potential of bringing religious identity to the political competition in Aceh, as other party's political candidates in contemporary political competition in Aceh who focus on Islamic matters are gaining popularity.

Moreover, the video collections by the Journeyman Pictures YouTube Channel in many scenes describe Aceh as a rich land of natural resources that was exploited by the Indonesian government. Ismail Syahputra, a GAM commander who was interviewed in the video titled "The Indonesian Army's Battle with Democracy" (Journeyman Pictures, 2016b), explains that Aceh should not be part of Indonesia because the income from the rich land of Aceh is mainly taken by the Indonesian government. The reporters also reported the revenue of Exxon Mobile: that from Aceh LNG alone, worth about USD 4 million a day. The same reason that causes the reporter to believe it became the reason why America was leaning toward the government rather than of the rebels, as stated by a voice-over in the videos, in "Indonesian Atrocities as Aceh Rebels Strive for Independence (2002)" (Journeyman Pictures, 2019b).

Despite the widely held perception in the analyzed videos about the exploitation of its natural resources by the Indonesian government was the primary cause of conflict, the findings suggest a more complex reality. While Barter (2008) acknowledges that natural resources, particularly LNG and petroleum, were a source of resentment, however, he believes this frustration was not equally felt across all districts, especially where the natural resources are fewer. Interestingly, although the 2006 law slightly reduced Aceh's share of LNG and crude oil revenue compared to the 2004 law, it did not reignite the conflict after the law was established. This suggests that while resource distribution was a significant grievance, other factors, such as political autonomy, historical identity, and the broader costs of war, also played crucial roles in shaping the conflict's resolution and the sustainability of peace in Aceh.

In addition, the Acehese might have been devastated by the destruction as a result of the conflict. The videos exhibit the poverty experienced by people living near the company's operations, as shown in "Indonesian Atrocities as Aceh Rebels Strive for Independence (2002)" (Journeyman Pictures, 2019b) and in "The Indonesian Army's Battle with

Democracy" (Journeyman Pictures, 2016b). The videos titled: "Aceh's Bitter Battle for Independence from Indonesia (2000)", "The Tsunami War," and "The Indonesian Army's Battle with Democracy" discuss the condition surrounding ExxonMobil. The footage reveals that local communities live in poverty while their land has been taken to expand the company's operations. ExxonMobil is guarded by more than 3,000 Indonesian troops, some of whom, according to human rights investigations, were involved in killings and sexual violence against civilians in "Indonesian Atrocities as Aceh Rebels Strive for Independence (2002)" (Journeyman Pictures, 2019b). The reporter also interviewed families who lost their family members, allegedly by the troops assigned to guard the company. They described how they found the body of their loved one wounded and lifeless, or some were killed in front of them. They hold the Indonesian armies who guarded the Exxon responsible for these atrocities.

Many scenes depict the arbitrary treatment of Acehese civilians by the Indonesian armies, including killings, injuries, and oppression, leaving them to live in fear and suppression. The reporter also noted that human rights abuses in Aceh led more Acehese to join GAM in their demand for independence, a demand consistently rejected by the Indonesian government. In the video titled *The Ethnic Cleansing in Aceh That Nobody Knows*, journalist John Martinkus argues that martial law did not destroy GAM but instead drove more civilians to join the resistance. Indeed, the martial law imposed by the Indonesian government in 2003 inflicted greater devastation on Aceh than it contributed to resolving the conflict. However, the human rights abuses portrayed in these videos occurred even before martial law was implemented and were already deeply painful for the Acehese people. Therefore, the international community must be more vigilant about the use of martial law in conflict zones to prevent further human rights violations. As the Amnesty International Organization (2004) has stated that martial law is a long-standing mechanism of human rights abuse that should not be reinstated.

Additionally, many scenes in the videos that show the arbitrary violence, torture, and physical destruction inflicted upon the Acehese people appear to have instilled fear. Indeed, the widespread human rights abuses depicted in these videos suggest have silenced the Acehese as the further cost of resistance unbearably high. As a result, even after the conflict formally ended, the lingering trauma and fear may have deterred Acehese from reigniting demands for independence. This highlights the long-term consequences of state repression, where the scars of past atrocities continue to shape political dynamics and constrain the possibilities for future resistance. At the same time, as mentioned above, the speech of GAM's current leader, Malik Mahmud Al-Haytar, that emphasized the stability that Aceh now enjoys. In a statement on August 14, 2020, Al-Haytar acknowledged both the unfulfilled aspects of the MoU Helsinki and the progress made since its signing, particularly in ensuring that Aceh remains a peaceful place for all, including tourists and investors (Serambi on TV, 2020). This suggests that while dissatisfaction remains, GAM leaders may also recognize the importance of maintaining stability to attract economic opportunities for Aceh. By avoiding reigniting conflict, as they may see tourism and investment as essential resources for Aceh's economic future.

Moreover, The constructionism and ethno-nationalism theories are less portrayed in the videos. It is still not concluded that theories are less important in understanding the conflict in Aceh. Although is not covered in the videos, the constructionism theory in understanding the cause of the conflict in Aceh aligns with Kratoska and Batson's (1993) argument that Indonesia's independence was rooted in territorial nationalism, which was politically and territorially created by the Dutch rather than emerging organically from a shared national identity. It also resonates with Renan's (2018, p.258) assertion that "unity is always achieved brutally," reflecting how the Indonesian government imposed national unity through force. Furthermore, Aisyah, Suhani, and Chaidar (2008) illustrate how

Aceh's integration into Indonesia was not inevitable but rather the result of persuasion by nationalist elites, particularly **Sukarno**. These perspectives highlight that Aceh's position within Indonesia was not a natural outcome but rather a product of political decisions and historical processes, fitting the criteria of constructionism.

All in all, in the videos, many scenes show the complexity of the causes of the conflict in Aceh. At the same time, it brings the conclusion that both sides, Acehnese separatists and Indonesian nationalists, have compelling reasons to be separate or to maintain the country's unity. However, learning from the videos, many cases depicted in the Journeyman Pictures' video collections, which highlight natural resource exploitation and human rights abuses, have not received adequate attention from the Indonesian government since the Aceh-Indonesia reconciliation, as mentioned by KONTRAS (2016). Therefore, this study suggests greater efforts that need to be made to address these unresolved grievances. Strengthening post-conflict policies and ensuring meaningful government actions on these issues could help prevent future tensions and contribute to lasting peace.

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