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SULTAN ISKANDAR MUDA: BETWEEN POLITICS OF POWER AND RELIGIOUS POLICY IN 17TH-CENTURY ACEH

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between the politics of power and policy during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636), a period that marked the zenith of the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate's glory. The aim of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of Sultan Iskandar Muda's leadership in the context of politics and religious policy in the Aceh Sultanate during the 17th century. This study employs a historical research approach comprising four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation and historiography, drawing on primary and secondary sources relevant to the Sultanate of Aceh and the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda. The findings of this study indicate that Sultan Iskandar Muda's achievements were evident not only in his ability to expand his realm to include Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, but also in his ability to establish a well-organised governmental structure through the implementation of the Adat Mahkota Alam as the legal foundation of the state, which integrated Islamic Sharia law with local customs and traditions. Thus, the relationship between political power and religious policy during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda demonstrates that the application of Islamic values within the legal and governmental systems served as a key instrument for strengthening the legitimacy of power and supporting the stability of the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate's government.

Keywords: *Sultan Iskandar Muda, the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam, power politics, religious policy, Islamic Sharia.*

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam is an important part of the development of Islamic civilization in the Indonesian archipelago, particularly during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636 CE). During this period, Aceh reached the height of its glory in the political, economic, and religious spheres (Lombard, 1986). Sultan Iskandar Muda was known as a strong and expansionist ruler who succeeded in extending Aceh's territory to include several regions in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula (Lombard, 1986). At the same time, he was also known as a Muslim ruler who placed Islam as one of the foundations of governance and the basis for the legitimacy of his power. These circumstances demonstrate that the politics of power and religious policy were two crucial aspects in understanding the leadership of Sultan Iskandar Muda (Adan, 2013).

The problem addressed in this study stems from research on the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636), which warrants further examination to explore the

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relationship between political power and religious policy in the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam. Studies of Sultan Iskandar Muda's reign may focus on political developments, the expansion of power, or the implementation of religious policies. However, if these aspects are discussed separately, the relationship between political and religious policies in the practice of governance cannot be fully understood. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap by analyzing the interconnection between Sultan Iskandar Muda's political power and his religious policies, particularly in building political power and shaping the identity of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam. This focus also allows for a discussion of how religious policies played a role in the administration of government and the strengthening of the sultan's legitimacy (Maulana et al., 2024).

Based on this research gap, the research questions in this paper are as follows: (1) What was Sultan Iskandar Muda's power politics like during his reign over the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam? (2) What religious policies did Sultan Iskandar Muda implement during his reign? (3) How did the relationship between political and religious policies shape the political power and identity of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam during Sultan Iskandar Muda's reign?

A study of Sultan Iskandar Muda's leadership is important because it illustrates how political power and religious authority interacted within the context of an Islamic kingdom in the Indonesian archipelago. In the 17th century, the Sultanate of Aceh faced political and commercial competition from European powers, particularly the Portuguese, while simultaneously establishing itself as a center of Islamic trade and scholarship. In this context, political and religious policies are crucial aspects to examine in order to understand how the sultan maintained his power, administered the government, and shaped the kingdom's identity (Hermansyah, 2020). This study is also relevant to the development of Archipelago Islamic historiography, as it offers insights into the relationship between religion and power within a local historical context without assuming that the two always coexisted harmoniously or were used solely for political gain.

Several previous studies have examined the development of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda from various perspectives. The first study is an article by Lailatus Solikah titled "The Development of Islam and Islamic Culture in Aceh During the Reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1637)." This study examines the development of Islam and Islamic culture in Aceh, including through the evolution of religious traditions, social customs rooted in Islamic values, and cultural elements that emerged during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda. This study provides an overview of the development of religious life and Islamic culture in Aceh, but its primary focus lies on religious and cultural aspects (Solikah, 2013).

The second study is an article by Yeyen Novita and colleagues titled "Analysis of the Economic System of the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam During the Reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda." This study examines the development of the economic system of the Aceh Sultanate during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda. In their discussion, the authors also touch on legal aspects and the application of Islamic law, including the existence of

the Qanun Meukuta Alam as part of the Aceh Sultanate's system of governance. This study contributes to our understanding of Aceh's economic development and system of governance, but its primary focus is on the kingdom's economic system (Novita et al., 2023).

Both studies serve as an important foundation for understanding the development of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda. Nevertheless, based on the research focus employed in this study, there remains room to develop an analysis that specifically links the politics of power and religious policies within a single historical explanatory framework. Research on religious and cultural development provides insight into the religious life of the people, while studies on the economic system explain the economic aspects and some elements of the kingdom's governance. However, questions regarding how the sultan's political power interacted with religious policies, how the application of Islamic norms related to governmental authority, and how these relationships helped shape the strength and identity of the Sultanate of Aceh still require more focused examination. This research gap does not mean that previous studies have completely ignored the relationship between politics and religion; rather, it indicates an opportunity to deepen the analysis of the relationship between these two aspects as a primary focus of analysis (Zaki et al., 2025).

Based on this gap, this study offers an analysis that integrates the political power and religious policies of Sultan Iskandar Muda. Political power is understood as the sultan's authority to govern, defend the realm, and control the power structure, while religious policy is examined through the application of Islamic law, the role of religious values in governance, and the relationship between political and religious authorities. The integration of these two aspects enables this study to explain not only which policies were implemented but also how political and religious policies were interrelated in the practice of governance. Through this analysis, this study seeks to assess the extent to which religious policies served as normative guidelines, sources of power legitimacy, and components of the kingdom's identity formation. Thus, the relationship between politics and religion is not assumed from the outset to be always harmonious, but is examined based on available evidence and historical context (Zaki et al., 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the relationship between political authority and religious policy as the central axis of analysis regarding the leadership of Sultan Iskandar Muda. Unlike previous studies, which primarily emphasized the development of Islam and Islamic culture or the kingdom's economic system, this study links the sultan's strategies of power, the implementation of Islamic law, and the formation of the Aceh Sultanate's identity within a single analytical framework. The contribution of this study goes beyond merely adding a description of political and religious policies; rather, it explains how these two dimensions interact in the administration of government and the formation of the kingdom's socio-political order. With this focus, this study is expected to enrich the study of the political history of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, particularly regarding the relationship between power,

Islamic law, and religious authority in the context of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam in the 17th century (Lombard, 1986; Zaki et al., 2025).

This study employs a historical method comprising four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Abdurahman, 2011). The heuristic stage involves searching for and collecting sources relevant to Sultan Iskandar Muda's political power and religious policies. The sources used include historical sources such as the Hikayat Aceh (*Hikayat Aceh; Or. 1954*, 2022) and Denys Lombard's work titled The Kingdom of Aceh in the Age of Iskandar Muda (1607–1636) (Lombard, 1986), as well as secondary sources such as history books, scholarly articles, journals, and other relevant documents. The source criticism phase was conducted to assess the credibility and relevance of the sources, while interpretation was used to connect historical facts and explain the relationship between political and religious policies. The research findings were then organized into a systematic historiography grounded in historical evidence.

The approaches used in this study include political and religious history approaches, integrated in an interdisciplinary manner. The political approach was used to analyze power structures, governance strategies, and Sultan Iskandar Muda's efforts to maintain and expand the influence of the Aceh Sultanate. Meanwhile, the religious history approach was used to examine Islamic policies, the application of Islamic law, and the role of religion in governance (Mail & Anchong, 2021). The combination of these two approaches aims to understand the relationship between political power and religious policy in a contextual manner, so that both can be analyzed as mutually interacting aspects in the development of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam (Zaki et al., 2025).

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of Sultan Iskandar Muda's leadership in the context of political power and religious policy in the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam during the 17th century (Lombard, 1986). Specifically, this study seeks to explain Sultan Iskandar Muda's political power strategies, identify the religious policies implemented during his reign, and analyze the relationship between political and religious policies in shaping the power and identity of the Sultanate of Aceh (Mail & Anchong, 2021). This study argues that Sultan Iskandar Muda's political strategies and religious vision played a role in shaping the power structure while also influencing the organization of social life based on Islamic values. Through this historical analysis, this study is expected to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between religion and power in the history of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs the historical research method proposed by Dudung Abdurrahman (2011), consisting of four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Abdurahman, 2011). During the heuristic stage, the study identified Hikayat Aceh (*Hikayat Aceh; Or. 1954*, 2022) as its principal historical text. To strengthen the contextual basis for examining political, legal, and religious institutions, the study also considered the historical material preserved in Adat Atjèh,

published in facsimile with an introduction by Drewes and Voorhoeve (1958), and the later textual tradition associated with Qanun Meukuta Alam. Adat Atjèh contains material on Acehnese court and administrative traditions, but the surviving manuscript has a later provenance; accordingly, its contents cannot be attributed wholesale to Iskandar Muda's reign (Drewes & Voorhoeve, 1958, pp. 7-32). The Qanun Meukuta Alam tradition is likewise treated cautiously because its surviving redactions do not constitute an authenticated autograph legal code of the early seventeenth century. Secondary scholarship, particularly Lombard (1986) and Hadi (2003) provides historiographical context for the relationship between state authority and Islam.

Source criticism was organized into external and internal assessment. External criticism considered authorship, provenance, approximate date, genre, and the transmission of manuscript witnesses; for Hikayat Aceh, this included distinguishing the surviving copy from the historical period it narrates (*Hikayat Aceh; Or. 1954*, 2022). Internal criticism considered the narrative purposes and potential biases of the texts, especially royal praise in Hikayat Aceh, and distinguished normative legal prescriptions from evidence of their implementation. Where accounts or interpretations differed, the study assessed their chronological proximity, textual transmission, and independent corroboration, rather than treating a later compilation as equivalent to a contemporary record. Claims that could not be corroborated were qualified as interpretations or later traditions. Interpretation then connected the critically assessed evidence concerning political and religious authority, and historiography organized the findings into a coherent historical account (Abdurahman, 2011; Hadi, 2003; Lombard, 1986).

This study employs a political approach to analyze the power structure, governance practices, and Sultan Iskandar Muda’s relationships with various groups within the Sultanate of Aceh. A religious-historical approach is used to examine the status of Islam, the role of the ulama, and religious policies in the political and social life of that period. These two approaches are combined to understand the interrelationship between political power and religious authority in shaping the character of the Aceh Sultanate in the 17th century. This analysis draws on Amirul Hadi’s (2003) study of the relationship between Islam and the state in Aceh (Hadi, 2003), as well as Denys Lombard’s (1986) work on various aspects of life in the Aceh Sultanate during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (Lombard, 1986).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Political Power Of Sultan Iskandar Muda In The 17th-Century Aceh Sultanate

The influence of Islam began to emerge in Aceh during the reign of Sultan Ali Mughayat Syah and reached its peak during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda. Sultan Iskandar was a descendant of two kingdoms in Aceh separated by a river: the Kingdom of Mahkota Alam and the Kingdom of Darul Kamal. Iskandar Muda, who possessed both courage and intelligence, was able to defeat the Portuguese, thereby earning their trust. Then, in 1015 H (1607 CE), Sultan Iskandar Muda was crowned king with the title Paduka Sri Sultan Iskandar Muda Johan Berdaulat (Solikah, 2013).

It was during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda that the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam reached the height of its glory and progress, establishing it as a strong, vast, and respected kingdom throughout the Nusantara. Various advancements and developments in the political, administrative, economic, social, and military spheres helped establish the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam as an influential Islamic sultanate in the Aceh region in particular, as well as throughout the Nusantara (Dia, 2025).

The achievements made by Sultan Iskandar Muda during his reign-such as territorial expansion-allowed him to control the entire region encompassing Aru, Deli, Johar, Bentan, Pahang, Kedah, Perak, and Nias. He also gained control of the ports along the Strait of Malacca and ensured the prosperity of these regions, making it impossible for them to be divided by foreign powers. These efforts were carried out through consensus; when consensus could not be reached, force was used. Thus, the territory of Aceh Darussalam expanded significantly during the reign of Sultan Iskandar. To the west, he controlled the regions of Daya, Labu, Singkel, Barus, Bataham, Pasaman, Tiku, Priaman, and Padang. To the east, his domain extended from Pedir and Pasai to Deli and Aru. He also controlled the regions on the Malay Peninsula, namely Johor, Kedah, Pahang, and Pera (Lombard, 1986).

Within the government structure, the Sultan carried out his duties with the assistance of several high-ranking officials, including a Prime Minister and his ministers (wazirs), as well as the Qadhi Malikul Adil, who was appointed as the Chief Justice and was responsible for establishing Islamic law and regulations. An admiral who headed the "Balai Laksamana" a kind of military headquarters overseeing the army and navy and the Minister of Dirham (Minister of Finance). In addition, the Acehnese government structure included officials who served as advisors to the king, handling matters such as state finances, river estuary traffic, the collection of import and export duties, and the office of the secretary of state (Ahmad, 1972).

The legal traditions associated with Sultan Iskandar Muda are frequently discussed under the names Adat Makota Alam or Qanun Meukuta Alam. These designations should not, however, be taken to identify a single surviving seventeenth-century statute whose full contents can be securely attributed to the Sultan. Adat Atjèh, preserved in a later manuscript and published in facsimile by Drewes and Voorhoeve, documents elements of Acehnese court and administrative traditions; its editorial introduction makes the later provenance of the manuscript clear (Drewes & Voorhoeve, 1958, pp 7-32). Modern historical studies place Acehnese legal and political institutions within a broader relationship between Islamic norms, customary practice, and royal authority (Hadi, 2003; Lombard, 1986). These materials support a cautious discussion of Aceh's legal-administrative traditions, but they do not by themselves establish that other states or sultanates adopted specific laws from Aceh. Accordingly, the claim of direct legislative influence on other polities is not retained without documentary evidence of transmission or adoption.

Sultan Iskandar Muda's economic measures included tightening trade licensing requirements for foreign merchants in order to curb their penetration and interference in

the Aceh region, as well as opening Bandar Aceh as an international port. In addition, the sultan also focused on key economic sectors, including agriculture, livestock, mining, industry, and shipping, which were managed and supervised by a special agency known as the Balai Furdhah. Sultan Iskandar Muda centralized the majority of Sumatra's pepper trade in Banda Aceh by enacting the "Qanun Seuneubok Lada," which contained various regulations regarding agriculture and livestock farming; he also established several sources of tax revenue to generate foreign exchange for the kingdom (Maulana et al., 2024).

Pepper is the most important and abundant of all the commodities traded in Sumatra. It has become a staple export, and exports are now on the rise due to growing demand from both Muslim and European merchants. During the reign of the Aceh Kingdom under Sultan Iskandar Muda, trade in Bandar Aceh flourished. Demand for pepper came not only from Muslim merchants but also from European merchants. To meet the growing demand for pepper, Sultan Iskandar Muda established a monopoly on the pepper trade in Aceh and all its subject territories. As Aceh expanded its territory, Sultan Iskandar Muda quickly recognized the importance of pepper. For this reason, the sultan sought to conquer the pepper-producing regions around Aceh. Once these regions were under his control, the sultan easily ordered that the pepper be brought to Banda Aceh and sold at a high price. A famous saying by Iskandar Muda is that anyone who wishes to buy pepper must come and eat it from his hand. All foreign merchants wishing to trade at one of Aceh's conquered ports must first stop in Aceh and request a permit in accordance with the applicable regulations (M, 2015).

In the political sphere, he succeeded in uniting all segments of society into the smallest social units, known as kaum; these kaum then formed gampongs, mukims (districts), and sagis (provinces), and he succeeded in establishing a well-organized and coordinated system of government between the central government and the regions, which were divided into several levels, each with its own leadership (Maulana et al., 2024).

The Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam played a significant role in the history of the Malay world, particularly in the spread and development of Islam throughout the Indonesian archipelago. Founded in the early 16th century, the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam reached the height of its power under Sultan Iskandar Muda Mahkota Alam from 1607 to 1636. The territory of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam encompassed most of Sumatra and extended to the Malay Peninsula. The Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam was known as a center of Islamic learning and culture in the Indonesian archipelago, with many Muslim clerics and scholars from various regions coming to Aceh to study and teach. The sultanate also played a role in international trade, connecting the Indonesian archipelago with the Middle East, India, and Europe. These conditions made the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam one of the largest maritime economic centers of its time. The Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam played a crucial role in the resistance against European colonialism particularly the Portuguese in Malacca making it a symbol of Islamic power and sovereignty in the Malay Archipelago (Miswari, 2024).

During the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda, the Kingdom of Aceh became one of the major Islamic powers. Naturally, in leading the kingdom, Sultan Iskandar Muda implemented several policies. As the basis for these policies, there were four forms of diplomacy. Such diplomacy includes: the "mouse-deer" diplomatic strategy for the international arena, diplomatic strategies through inter-state marriages, power diplomacy through military force, and economic diplomacy all aimed at gaining influence and political power (Novita et al., 2023).

The Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam possessed a large military force and numerous forts scattered throughout the region. Soldiers were stationed regularly to guard these numerous forts. Attacking the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam was virtually impossible, even though its enemy at the time was the powerful Portuguese fleet. Just like Samudra Pasai and Peureulak, the very existence of Aceh Darussalam depended heavily on its control over trade traffic in the Strait of Malacca (Putra & Muhsin, 2022). That is why Aceh Darussalam launched an attack on Malacca, as the Portuguese had been attempting to establish Malacca as the economic hub of the Strait of Malacca. This illustrates how Aceh Darussalam had to remain vigilant at all times. That is why troops were stationed everywhere, even though the city center Kutaraja appeared to be a very active trading hub. This intense trade activity made the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam a prosperous and cosmopolitan nation (Wijaya, 2022).

Aceh Darussalam's cosmopolitanism is also evident in its well-organized urban planning. Starting from the southern sea route, Aceh Darussalam opened three maritime routes to the ocean: the southernmost route to the Middle East and Europe, the central route to India, and the northern route to the Bay of Bengal. Adequate docks were also provided for incoming ships. Small boats can travel inland via three river estuaries. The southern estuary leads to the city center, where a large open space serves as the market hub. There, trade takes place at a brisk pace. The central route could actually reach the interior, but it is designated as the path leading to the Darud Dunya Palace. The northern route is the longest route connecting to the Krueng Aceh River. There are many towns along it. Each town has important commodities that merchants need. All of these routes offer a high level of security to ensure that merchants are safe and feel at ease (Hajrina, 2024).

Sultan Iskandar Muda's Religious Policies During His Reign in Aceh

The religious policies of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636) were a crucial foundation that led the Sultanate of Aceh to its golden age. During his reign, political and military glory went hand in hand with the strengthening of Islam as the basis of social ethics, a source of political legitimacy, and the legal foundation of the state. Iskandar Muda combined the authority of the monarchy with the values of Sharia law, thereby establishing a theocratic-monarchical form of government. Numerous accounts attest to the Sultan's personal piety, his adherence to Sharia law, and his commitment to building mosques and enforcing Islamic moral codes throughout the Aceh realm (Sufi, 1995).

In terms of the spread of Islam, Islam flourished in Aceh due to several contributing factors, one of which was its rapid growth and the support it received from the kings of the Two Holy Cities (Mecca and Medina), as well as the legitimacy it gained from them. The spirit of Islam spurred the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam to enforce laws fully grounded in Islamic law and to enact Islamic-based legislation mandating compliance with Islamic law and Sharia. During this period, the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam became a center for the spread and development of Islam throughout the Indonesian archipelago (Dia, 2025).

Sultan Iskandar Muda established a model of governance that integrated political authority with religious legitimacy. The enforcement of Islamic law, the development of religious educational institutions, and the formal relationship between the umara (government) and the ulama served as strategic tools for strengthening the state, unifying conquered territories, and enhancing Aceh's prestige as a center of Islamic civilization in Southeast Asia. The construction and expansion of Islamic boarding schools, religious study centers, and centers for scholarly research during this period demonstrate that the Islamic intellectual tradition received the full support of the state. A number of studies indicate that the organization of educational institutions such as the Balai Setia Ulama or the Balai Jamiah was carried out systematically, thereby producing educated scholars who helped uphold the implementation of royal laws (Solikah, 2013).

One of the most notable policies was the construction of large mosques and the strengthening of religious infrastructure. Bustanus Salatin notes that Iskandar Muda built several major mosques in the mukim regions, including the Baitur Rahman Mosque, which later became a symbol of Aceh's grandeur. The construction of these mosques was closely tied to the Sultan's administrative policy of dividing Aceh into mukim units—regions that served both religious and political functions. The division into mukims made it easier for the government to regulate religious activities, oversee public morality, and strengthen a Sharia-based social structure. At the same time, the Sultan implemented a separation between the Sharia and customary judicial systems. This policy affirmed the position of Islamic law as the primary foundation, without eliminating the role of customary law as a part of Aceh's local identity (Sufi, 1995).

In the legislative sphere, the Sultan drafted and enacted various qanuns governing worship, public morality, and taxation mechanisms based on the principles of Sharia. Islamic Sharia applied not only to matters of faith and personal law but also to public law, such as criminal law. During the era of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam, Islamic Sharia served as the sole legitimate law in the country; thus, there was only one valid legal system: Islamic Sharia (Yunus et al., 2023). This policy had not only religious significance but also administrative significance, as it strengthened the state's control over legal legitimacy. Several studies confirm that the more systematic implementation of Sharia law did indeed gain momentum during the reign of Iskandar Muda, although its implementation remained influenced by political dynamics and the kingdom's fiscal needs (Gazali, 2016).

The judicial structure was also clarified by appointing a Kadli Malikul Adil to handle Sharia cases, while customary matters fell under the jurisdiction of a separate traditional institution. This reflects a balance between the principles of "adat bak poteumeureuhom, hukom bak syiah kuala" (Sufi, 1995). State support for religious education enabled Aceh to flourish as a center for the study of Sufism and theology in the Nusantara region. This era saw the rise of great figures such as Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin Pasai the latter even serving as the Sultan's closest advisor on religious matters. The involvement of ulama in the system of government was evident in the existence of consultative bodies such as Balairung Sari and Balai Gadeng, where ulama and uleebalang discussed royal policy (Gazali, 2016).

The Sultan's religious policies also served cultural and diplomatic functions. The promotion of Islamic education and law helped establish Aceh's reputation as a center of learning and a protector of the Muslim community. This attracted scholars and students from various regions and fostered the exchange of manuscripts, the development of intellectual networks, and the strengthening of the Acehnese people's religious identity. This intellectual tradition made Aceh one of the key centers in the development of Islam in Southeast Asia. Although a shift later occurred when Nuruddin ar-Raniry arrived in Aceh and introduced an orthodox approach, during the reign of Iskandar Muda himself, religious traditions still allowed for a diversity of Sufi thought, including the teachings of the Wujudiyyah school (Sufi, 1995).

From a cultural and diplomatic perspective, Iskandar Muda's religious policies were also used to establish Aceh's image as a center of learning and a protector of Muslims this led to the printing of manuscripts and the exchange of religious scholars with regions in the Middle East and India, as well as the formation of public norms that unify the religious identity of the Acehnese people; contemporary studies emphasize that the strengthening of Islamic education and law in this era has helped Aceh attract religious scholars and students, expanding an intellectual network that has made Aceh a religious reference point in the region (Solikah, 2013).

Nevertheless, his religious policies were not without controversy. The enforcement of Sharia law often went hand in hand with the centralization of power, resulting in adjustments to the scope of local autonomy. Recent peer-reviewed studies help explain why: they treat Islamic authority in seventeenth-century Aceh as something that both legitimized the ruler and was itself shaped by the needs of the state. Zaki et al. (2025), reading the Qanun Meukuta Alam through a structural-functionalist framework, show that the ulama were incorporated into governance as partners of the ruler (umara), so that religious counsel became part of the kingdom's formal structure of authority. Hakim et al. (2025) add an external dimension, arguing that Aceh's ties with the Ottoman world enhanced its standing as an Islamic sultanate and informed its administrative and ceremonial practice, although this influence was selective and negotiated rather than wholesale. Imawan (2022) shows how the office of Qadi Malikul Adil, held later in the century by Abdurrauf as-Singkili, gave Islamic law an institutional anchor within the sultanate's judiciary. The political stakes of defining religious authority are also visible

in the Wujudiyyah controversy, which Sangidu (2026) interpret as a contest in which takfir rulings and the suppression of texts functioned as politico-religious instruments for enforcing orthodoxy, a pattern that became more pronounced after Iskandar Muda's reign. Earlier work likewise points out that Iskandar Muda's religious project also served as an instrument of state legitimacy and political integration, rather than merely an expression of the people's piety (Shadiqin, 2010). Nevertheless, Sultan Iskandar Muda's legacy of religious policies remains a enduring institutional and cultural foundation in the social life, legal system, and identity of the Acehnese people to this day (Nurainiah et al., 2023).

The Relationship Between Power Politics and Religious Policy in Shaping the Identity of the Aceh Sultanate

As a sultan raised in a royal environment that practiced an Islamic way of life, and driven by a personal desire to contribute to the advancement of Islam, Sultan Iskandar Muda, upon his coronation, made numerous contributions through policies aimed at promoting Islam one of which was his ability to strengthen Islamic life. In addition to Aceh Darussalam, Islam subsequently spread to various other regions throughout the archipelago. One of the factors that contributed to this was the rapid growth of Islam, which received support from the kings of the Two Holy Cities (Mecca and Medina) and gained legitimacy from them. The spirit of Islam has driven the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam to enforce laws fully imbued with Islamic principles and to enact Islamic-based legislation that mandates compliance with Islamic law and Sharia. During this period, the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam became a center for the spread and development of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. This was marked by the construction of the Baiturrahman Mosque in the capital, mosques in various regions, and Islamic study institutions including Baiturrahman University as well as the establishment of dayahs (Islamic boarding schools) throughout the territory of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam. Additionally, judicial institutions developed, consisting of four types: civil, criminal, religious, and commercial (Maulana et al., 2024).

The concept of an ideal system of government according to Islam is further reinforced by the establishment of a judicial institution (qadi), which is responsible for formulating and enforcing Islamic law, as well as assisting the king in governing the realm. The establishment of this judicial institution also serves to limit the king's power so that he does not act arbitrarily. Supported by the role of the ulama in legitimizing his authority, the king is thus prevented from acting arbitrarily. Iskandar Muda played a pivotal role in the development of Sufism in Aceh Darussalam. Among his initiatives was the establishment of religious institutions, including the Balai Seutia Hukama an institution of learning where scholars and astute, intelligent thinkers gathered to discuss and advance knowledge. Of course, at that time, the field of knowledge that was flourishing was that related to Sufism. The Balai Seutia Ulama was an institution that oversaw matters of education and instruction related to religious education, which flourished during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda. The Balai Jemaah Himpunan Ulama

served as a place for scholars to gather and exchange ideas, discussing educational issues and the science of education related to the teachings developed during that period, namely the Sufi teachings of Syamsuddin as-Sumatrani. The establishment of educational institutions known as Meunasah (madrasahs) and mosques in every village was intended to provide education particularly religious education in subjects such as Sufism, fiqh, ethics, Arabic, history, and others (Huda, 2016).

Sultan Iskandar Muda's political authority and religious policy can be interpreted as mutually reinforcing through three related mechanisms. First, the idealized image of kingship in Hikayat Aceh links royal prestige with Islamic values, suggesting that religious representation contributed to the legitimacy of the ruler; as a courtly narrative, however, the text is stronger evidence for ideals of kingship than for the implementation of particular measures (*Hikayat Aceh; Or. 1954*, 2022; Lombard, 1986). Second, the presence of influential scholars in Aceh's courtly milieu suggests that association with religious learning could reinforce the Sultan's authority, although the exact formal responsibilities of individual scholars should not be assumed without more direct documentation (Gazali, 2016; Hadi, 2003). Third, the conjunction of adat and Islamic legal concepts in Acehnese political traditions suggests a normative framework through which authority and social order were articulated. The later manuscript history of Adat Atjèh and Qanun Meukuta Alam limits any attempt to infer the precise enforcement of particular regulations during the reign itself (Drewes & Voorhoeve, 1958; Hadi, 2003)Thus, religious authority can be analyzed as a resource for political legitimacy and consolidation, while specific claims of coercive control require additional contemporary evidence.

With the enactment of various qanuns and the establishment of judicial and religious institutions such as the qadhi, mufti, and council of ulama Sultan Iskandar Muda not only served as a political leader but also held a pivotal role in enforcing Islamic law and regulating religious life within his realm (Maulana et al., 2024). These policies demonstrate that the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam developed not only as a military and economic power but also as an Islamic kingdom that placed the principles of Sharia as one of the foundations for governance, the legal system, education, and the social life of the community (Hidayat et al., 2023). As a result, Aceh’s identity as a center for the development and spread of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago has grown stronger, both among the local community and within the broader network of Islamic scholarship (Miswari, 2024). Through a combination of political policies including those related to the military, territorial expansion, trade, and diplomacy as well as religious policies such as the enforcement of qanun, the strengthening of the role of the ulama, and the establishment of a way of life based on Sharia law, Iskandar Muda succeeded in forging Aceh’s collective identity as an Islamic sultanate with strong legitimacy (Mail & Anchong, 2021; Zaki et al., 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in treating political policy and religious policy as a single, mutually reinforcing process of identity formation rather than as separate domains. Recent studies have tended to examine one dimension at a time, Zaki et al. (2025)

concentrate on the relationship between ulama and umara within the Qanun Meukuta Alam, Imawan (2022) on the judicial role of a single jurist, Hakim et al. (2025) on the transfer of military, technical, and administrative expertise from the Ottoman world, Sangidu (2026) on the politics of orthodoxy that followed Iskandar Muda's reign, and Azizah and Hamzah (2022) on Bustān al-Salāṭīn as a source for the formation of government and political conduct under Iskandar Thani. Each clarifies an important part of the picture, but, in the literature reviewed here, less attention is paid to how military expansion, control of trade routes, and diplomacy on the one hand, and the enforcement of qanun, the role of the ulama, and a Sharia-based way of life on the other, together produced Aceh's collective identity as an Islamic sultanate during Iskandar Muda's own reign. This study addresses that gap by showing that territorial and commercial power provided the resources and reach of the state, while religious policy provided legitimacy and social cohesion, so that the sultan's authority rested on the interaction between the two. In doing so, it also refines the distinction drawn earlier between an internally oriented religious policy and a hegemony-oriented foreign policy, by showing that both fed into one project of state legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607–1636) demonstrated a close connection between the politics of power and religious policies in strengthening the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam. Political power was exercised through territorial expansion, the strengthening of governmental structures, the regulation of trade, and military and diplomatic strategies to maintain Aceh's influence in the Malacca Strait region. Meanwhile, religious policies were reflected in the strengthening of the role of Islamic scholars, the development of Islamic educational institutions, the construction of mosques, and the role of Islamic law in government and society. Aceh's legal and governance traditions, including those associated with the Adat Mahkota Alam or Qanun Meukuta Alam, demonstrate a connection between Islamic values, local customs, and the authority of the ruler. However, based on a critical analysis of the sources, the limited origins and transmission of the surviving manuscripts do not yet allow all provisions within these traditions to be definitively identified as laws directly formulated or implemented by Sultan Iskandar Muda. Thus, the relationship between political power and religious policy during his reign can be understood as a mutually reinforcing process: political and economic power expanded the sultanate's sphere of influence, while Islamic values and the involvement of religious scholars played a role in strengthening the government's legitimacy and shaping Aceh's identity as one of the centers of Islamic civilization in the Indonesian archipelago during the 17th century.

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