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Beyond Religious Solidarity: Asymmetric Maritime Interdependence in Aceh–Ottoman Relations, 1538–1568

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Abstract

The relationship between the Aceh Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire in 1538–1568 emerged from the intersection of political, economic, and religious interests within the changing geopolitical order of the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean. Previous studies have examined these relations through Ottoman archival sources, Acehnese historiographical accounts, and Ottoman involvement in the Aceh–Portuguese conflict, identifying various motives underlying the relationship. This article advances these interpretations by arguing that Aceh–Ottoman relations constituted a form of asymmetric maritime interdependence, shaped through the negotiation of mutual interests but constrained by the differing capacities and strategic priorities of both sultanates. Using a historical approach based on source criticism, interpretation, and historiographical analysis, this study examines the relationship through interconnected political, economic, religious, and maritime dimensions. The findings demonstrate that maritime power provided the strategic framework within which both parties negotiated their interests. Ottoman military expertise, weaponry, and technical assistance responded to Aceh's security needs, while Aceh's geographical position, regional networks, and access to eastern Indian Ocean commerce offered strategic value to Ottoman interests in sustaining Muslim trade networks and challenging Portuguese maritime expansion. However, cooperation remained conditioned by the unequal capabilities, geographical positions, and priorities of the two powers. Thus, Aceh–Ottoman relations were neither merely an expression of religious solidarity nor a relationship of unilateral assistance, but an asymmetric form of maritime interdependence in which both parties derived strategic benefits while pursuing distinct interests and operating within different constraints.

Keywords: *Aceh Sultanate; Ottoman Empire; Indian Ocean; Maritime Power; Reciprocity.*

Introduction

The relationship between the Aceh Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth century emerged within a profound transformation of the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese occupation of Malacca in 1511 and its subsequent efforts to control strategic maritime points increasingly linked commercial competition with naval force and the regulation of maritime trade.[1] For Aceh, which was emerging as an important political and commercial power around the Strait of Malacca, Portuguese expansion altered the regional balance of power and threatened established patterns of maritime commerce and access to international trade.[2] From the western Indian Ocean, the Ottoman Empire faced a related strategic pressure as Portuguese expansion threatened the Red Sea commercial system and maritime routes connecting Ottoman Egypt and the Hijaz with the wider Indian Ocean.[3] The convergence of these circumstances made Aceh–Ottoman relations significant not simply as an encounter between two Muslim powers, but as part of a broader struggle over maritime security, trade, political influence, and the circulation of people and commodities across the Indian Ocean.

Existing scholarship on Aceh–Ottoman relations has examined several important dimensions of this historical relationship. Studies of Aceh have emphasized its political and commercial rise in the Strait of Malacca, its resistance to Portuguese expansion, and its efforts to strengthen its position within the Indian Ocean.[4] Research on the Ottoman Empire, meanwhile, has examined its incorporation of Egypt and the Hijaz, its concern with the security of the Red Sea, the spice trade, pilgrimage routes, and its response to Portuguese expansion into the Indian Ocean.[5] Other studies have highlighted diplomatic exchanges, military assistance, religious solidarity, and commercial interests connecting Aceh and the Ottoman world. Taken together, this scholarship establishes that the relationship involved political, eco-

1 Gabriel Mathias Soares, "Arabic History Writing in the Context of Portuguese Transgressions in the Sixteenth-Century Indian Ocean," *Global Histories: A Student Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (July, 2022), p. 13. https://doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2022.508

2 Ooi Keat Gin, "'Bridge' to 'Fence': A Maritime History of the Straits of Malacca," *Journal of Maritime Studies and National Integration* Vol. 6, No. 1 (2022), pp. 8-9. https://doi.org/10.14710/jmsni.v5i2.9443

3 Abdulmennan M. Altintas, "Between Commerce and Sanctity: Ottoman Policies and International Boundaries in the Early Modern Red Sea," *Journal of Global History* (2026), pp. 1-2. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022826100497

4 Kenneth R. Hall, "Maritime Trade and Societal Transitions in the Western Indonesian Archipelago: Samudra-Pasai at the Dawn of the European Age (c. 1200–1500)," *Asian Review of World Histories* Vol. 5, No. 1 (January, 2017), p. 69. http://dx.doi.org/10.12773/arwh.2017.5.1.031

5 Abdulmennan M. Altintas, "Between Commerce…, pp. 4-5.

nomic, military, and religious considerations. It also demonstrates that Aceh and the Ottoman Empire encountered Portuguese expansion from different geographical positions but within an increasingly interconnected maritime environment.

Nevertheless, these dimensions have generally been discussed as separate aspects rather than as interconnected elements of a single strategic relationship. The political interpretation tends to emphasize military alliance, sovereignty, and resistance to Portugal; economic studies focus on pepper, maritime commerce, and the Red Sea spice trade; while religious approaches stress Muslim solidarity, pilgrimage, jihad, and the Ottoman responsibility for the Holy Cities.[6] Such approaches are valuable, but they leave insufficiently explained how these motives interacted, how particular needs generated practical cooperation, and why cooperation could develop between two powers whose geographical positions, resources, and strategic capacities were markedly different. The research gap therefore lies not in the absence of evidence concerning Aceh–Ottoman contacts, but in the limited integration of political, economic, and religious motives with the maritime power structure in which those motives acquired strategic significance.

This article intervenes in the historiography of Aceh–Ottoman relations by challenging the tendency to characterize their sixteenth-century relationship as a stable and reciprocal alliance. Rather than assuming reciprocity as evidence of symmetry, the article demonstrates that Aceh–Ottoman relations constituted an asymmetrical and contingent form of interdependence, in which both parties pursued their own interests while possessing different capabilities, needs, and strategic resources. Aceh sought political and military support, the protection of maritime commerce, and greater security for Muslim travellers and pilgrims, while the Ottoman Empire pursued interests connected to the Red Sea system, the protection of pilgrimage routes, the circulation of eastern commodities, its position as a major Muslim power, and the containment of Portuguese expansion. These divergent but overlapping interests produced a relationship in which reciprocity operated through complementary resources rather than equal capacities. Aceh offered access to strategic ports, maritime networks, and the commercial environment of the eastern Indian Ocean, whereas the Ottomans possessed greater military, technological, and geopolitical capabilities. Alfred Thayer Mahan's concept of sea power is employed to situate these interactions within the strategic significance of maritime routes and nodes, while K. J. Holsti's theory of collaboration helps explain how cooperation could emerge between actors with unequal capabilities. Political, economic, and religious motives are therefore

6 Lukman Hakim, Murodi, and Andi Rahman, "The Ottoman Response to the Portuguese-Acehnese Conflicts in the 16th Century," *Historia Madania: Jurnal Ilmu Sejarah* Vol. 8, No. 2 (2024), 142-145. https://doi.org/10.15575/hm.v8i2.43178; Marie-Sybille de Vienne, "Premiers Jalons Pour Une Histoire Economique du Sultanat d'Aceh à « l'âge du commerce » (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles)." *Archipel* 87 (2014), pp. 245-246.

treated not as separate or mutually exclusive explanations, but as interconnected drivers that shaped the form, intensity, and limits of this interdependence. The article consequently reframes the Aceh–Ottoman relationship not as a stable alliance based primarily on religious solidarity, but as a pragmatic relationship whose reciprocity was conditioned by asymmetrical capabilities and changing strategic circumstances in the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean.

Accordingly, this study contributes to the historiography of Aceh–Ottoman relations by integrating the political, economic, religious, and maritime dimensions of the relationship into a single analytical framework. Rather than reducing the relationship to a single cause, it demonstrates how these motives interacted and were translated into concrete forms of collaboration between 1538 and 1568. The study aims, first, to identify the political, economic, and religious motives that encouraged the Aceh Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire to develop and sustain their relationship during this period; and second, to explain how maritime power and collaboration transformed those motives into practical cooperation. The analysis is based on historical evidence contained in the source corpus, including correspondence between rulers, travel accounts, chronicles, studies of Ottoman policy and Aceh, and works on Indian Ocean commerce and pilgrimage, which are critically examined by relating events, statements, and patterns of interaction to the motives and strategic interests of each actor.

Method

The convergence of interests between the Aceh Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire is examined through three interconnected functional dimensions: political, economic, and religious motives. Rather than treating these motives as isolated factors, this study conceptualizes them as interconnected drivers that generated specific needs and interests within the strategic geography of the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean. To reconstruct how these interests emerged, interacted, and developed historically, this study employs the historical method through four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. At the heuristic stage, primary sources were traced through the Ottoman archives at the Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Devlet Arşivleri in Istanbul, particularly correspondence between the rulers of Aceh and the Ottoman Empire, including a letter from Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah al-Kahhar to Sultan Süleyman I and a letter from Sultan Selim II to Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah al-Kahhar. Additional primary sources were obtained through field research in Banda Aceh by documenting the graves of Ottoman soldiers, the tomb of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah al-Kahhar, Acehnese and Ottoman coins, and other relevant artifacts, supplemented by interviews with the curator of the Pedir Museum collection. These primary sources were complemented by secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and relevant

previous studies.

The next stage involved source criticism to assess the authenticity, provenance, credibility, and contextual reliability of the collected evidence. External criticism examined the identity, provenance, material condition, and chronology of the sources, while internal criticism assessed their content, consistency, perspective, and historical context by comparing information across different sources to identify corroboration, discrepancies, and possible biases. The verified sources were subsequently classified chronologically and thematically according to their political, economic, and religious dimensions.

The interpretation stage employed an integrated explanatory framework combining motive theory, Alfred Thayer Mahan's concept of sea power, and K. J. Holsti's theory of collaboration. These theoretical perspectives were applied sequentially but interdependently rather than as separate analytical lenses. Motive theory was first used to identify the political, economic, and religious needs and interests that prompted each sultanate to establish and maintain relations. Mahan's concept of sea power was then employed to situate these motives within the strategic geography of the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean, particularly the significance of maritime routes, ports, commercial networks, and strategic nodes. The analysis subsequently employed Holsti's theory of collaboration to explain how these different needs and interests were translated into cooperation through the exchange of complementary resources between actors with unequal capabilities. This integrated framework thus connects motives to strategic maritime conditions and, ultimately, to patterns of collaboration and interdependence. It enables the study to examine not only why Aceh and the Ottoman Empire sought closer relations, but also how their respective interests, strategic positions, and unequal capabilities shaped the form, reciprocity, and limits of their relationship. Through this framework, reciprocity is not equated with symmetry; rather, the relationship is examined as an asymmetrical and contingent form of interdependence shaped by changing strategic circumstances in the Indian Ocean.

The final stage was historiography, in which the historical reconstruction was presented chronologically and analytically, with particular attention to causation, change, continuity, and the shifting configuration of interests and capabilities between the two sultanates during the period 1538–1568.

Political Motives: Sovereignty, Strategic Cooperation, and Resistance to Portuguese Expansion

Aceh's political strategy in the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean was shaped by the simultaneous pursuit of state consolidation, regional expansion, and the preservation of political autonomy. The Portuguese occupation of Malacca in 1511 altered the regional balance of power and created a strate-

gic environment in which Aceh had to strengthen its position among competing powers. Portuguese influence extended to Pedir, Pasai, and Daya, while Aru, located southeast of Aceh, also became connected to Portuguese interests and had assisted Portuguese operations in Pasai. These developments did not simply place Aceh in a defensive position; they increased the strategic importance of Aceh's efforts to consolidate its authority over neighbouring territories and secure its maritime sphere of influence. Portuguese military pressure was not merely hypothetical. In 1521 Jorge de Brito led seven ships against Aceh, sailed along the Aceh River, destroyed a town, and obtained war booty before being prevented from advancing further by Acehnese resistance.[7] The episode demonstrated that Portuguese expansion could directly affect Aceh's political centre and, at the same time, reinforced the strategic imperative for Aceh to strengthen its military and political capacity. Thus, the preservation of sovereignty should be understood not as a purely defensive objective, but as part of a broader strategy through which Aceh sought to consolidate its state, expand its regional influence, and maintain autonomy within a changing maritime political order. In the theory of motives, the preservation of existence is among the most fundamental motives. Forgas and his colleagues describe survival instinct as a basic motive that can produce defensive behaviour, including the creation of strong social bonds and the embracing of actors who share cultural norms and values.[8]

This broader political orientation helps explain why Aceh's engagement with the Ottoman Empire cannot be reduced to a search for protection against Portugal. Aceh required external connections that could complement its own process of power consolidation and regional expansion. The Ottoman Empire offered precisely such a strategic connection: a major Muslim power with military, political, and diplomatic resources that could strengthen Aceh's position beyond the limits of its immediate regional capabilities. Aceh's appeal to the Ottoman Empire therefore formed part of a wider strategy of power accumulation in which external cooperation supported internal consolidation and regional projection. International connection itself strengthened Aceh's position. Dasgupta notes that Aceh's international connections were an important factor in reinforcing its position in the middle of the sixteenth century.[9] The request for Ottoman support thus represented more than a search for friendship. It was a political attempt to increase the probability of survival by connecting Aceh to a wider power network. Aceh's political strategy also in-

7 P.A. Tiele, "De Europeers in den Maleischen Archipel; Eerste Gedeelte, 1509-1529", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indie* (1877), p. 368.

8 Joseph P. Forgas, Kipling D. Williams, dan Simon M. Laham, "Social Motivation; Introduction and Overview", in Joseph P. Forgas (ed.), *Social Motivation; Conscious and Unconscious Processes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 5.

9 Arun Kumar Dasgupta, *Acheh in Indonesian Trade and Politics 1600-1641* (Michigan: University Microfilms. Inc, 1962), p. 46.

cluded an effort to strengthen military capability and political standing. In its correspondence with Sultan Suleiman I, Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah al-Kahhar requested a special relationship with the Ottoman centre and asked not to be treated simply as one of the pashas, but to be regarded among the rulers associated with Egypt, Yemen, Jeddah, and Aden.[10] Whatever the precise administrative implications of the request, the political message was clear: Aceh sought a position within the Ottoman sphere that could provide protection and increase its standing.

The request also needs to be read against Aceh's own territorial expansion. Aceh had conquered Daya in 1520, Pidie in 1521, and Pasai in 1524, and attacked Aru in 1529.[11] Under Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah al-Kahhar, Acehnese control expanded toward the western coast of Sumatra, including Singkel, Barus, Passaman, Tiku, Pariaman, and Padang.[12] Control of the western coast also offered an alternative route toward Java because Portuguese control of the eastern side of Sumatra and Malacca made the western maritime corridor strategically valuable. Ottoman military participation subsequently became visible in Acehnese campaigns. Ottoman troops were reported in the Acehnese attack on the Batak area in 1539[13] and again in the campaign against Aru.[14] The evidence suggests that Aceh used Ottoman military resources to reinforce its own regional ambitions. Those ambitions cannot be reduced to one objective. Territorial expansion could provide political and material advantages, but it could also weaken local powers that were aligned with Portugal. The Portuguese presence in Malacca therefore made internal and external dimensions overlap. Expansion strengthened Aceh's regional position while potentially reducing the political space available to Portuguese influence. The result was a reciprocal political effect. Ottoman support increased Aceh's military capacity, while the relationship increased Aceh's political prestige. Aceh could be perceived as a regional representative of a wider Islamic centre, thereby strengthening its authority in relation to neighbouring powers. The relationship consequently contributed to both material capability and political image.

On the Ottoman side, Sultan Suleiman I was associated in official documents with claims to universal caliphal leadership through titles such as

10 Rizaulhak Sah, *Aci Padisahi Sultan Alaeddin'in Kanuni Sultan Suleyman'a Mektubu* (Ankara: Universitesi Dil, Tarih-Cografya Fakultesi Tarih Arastirmalari Dergisi, 1967), p. 185.

11 Zakaria Ahmad dkk., *Sejarah Perlawanan terhadap Kolonialisme dan Imperialisme di Daerah Aceh* (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1982), pp. 9-10.

12 Rusdi Sufi, *Pahlawan Nasional Sultan Iskandar Muda* (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Direktorat Sejarah dan Nilai Tradisional Proyek Inventarisasi dan Dokumentasi Sejarah Nasional, 1995), p. 12.

13 Ferdinand Mendez Pinto, *The Voyages and Adventures of Ferdinand Mendez Pinto, the Portuguese* (London: F. Macock, 1663), p. 32.

14 *Ibid*., pp. 75-76.

Imamah al-'Uzhma, *Khilafah al-Kubra*, and *Warisu al-Khilafati al-Kubra*.[15] These claims emerged at a time when the Ottoman Empire had reached a major territorial expansion and controlled important former centres of Islamic political authority as well as the holy cities. The position of the Ottoman ruler could therefore be understood through a centre-periphery relationship in which political and sacred centrality reinforced one another. Within that political conception, protection of Muslim communities was not merely an optional act. Ibn Khaldun associates the responsibility of the ruler with protecting Islam and exercising leadership,[16] while Halil Inalcik notes that Suleiman's universal caliphal claim encouraged a sense of responsibility toward Muslims in India, Sumatra, and Central Asia when they faced external aggression.[17] The Ottoman response to Aceh consequently had a political meaning within the empire's broader understanding of its role. This pattern is visible beyond Aceh. On 22 June 1538 the Ottomans responded to a request from Gujarat and prepared a major naval expedition against Portuguese power at Diu.[18] The fleet and military force were substantial, involving galleys, auxiliary vessels, 1.500 janissaries, 2.000 archers, 500 Mamluks, troops from Anatolia and the Mediterranean, and technical specialists.[19] In the same year, Ottoman assistance was sent to Aceh, including troops, firearms, and artillery.[20] Ottoman responses to Muslim appeals in India, Central Asia, and Aceh therefore formed part of a broader political pattern rather than an isolated act.

Ottoman political support for Aceh also served the strategic objective of weakening Portugal in the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese challenge was not confined to Malacca. Since the early sixteenth century, Portuguese forces had sought access to the Red Sea[21] and attempted to seize Aden, the gateway into that sea.[22] Ottoman control of Egypt after 1517 made Portuguese pressure on the Red Sea a direct threat to Ottoman territory and influence. The Ottoman response was to work with Muslim powers located along the Indian Ocean. When the Ottomans prepared their campaign against Diu in 1538,

15 S. Tufan Buzpinar, "On the Emergence of the Ottoman Caliphate in the Sixteenth Century", dalam Abdulrahim Abu Husayn (ed.), *1516 the Year That Changed the Middle East* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2021), pp. 34-35.

16 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. I (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 388.

17 Halil Inalcik, *Devlet-i 'Aliyye*, vol. I (Istanbul: Turkiye Is Bankasi Kultur Yayinlari, 2022), pp. 145-146.

18 Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 61.

19 Salih Ozbaran, "Osmanli Imparatorlugu ve Hindistan Yolu: Onaltinci Yuzyilda Ticaret Yollari Uzerinde Turk-Portekiz Rekabet ve Iliskileri", *Tarih Dergisi*, Vol. 31 (1977), p. 99.

20 Rebecca D. Catz, *The Travels of Mendes Pinto* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 27.

21 Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400–1668* (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), p. 79.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

they sent Solak Ferhad to Muslim ports in Yemen and Hadramaut.[23] He travelled through Zebid, Aden, Shihr, and then across the Arabian Sea to Zeyla, securing support from local rulers.[24] The network extended from the western Indian Ocean through Yemen and Hadramaut, Gujarat, and finally to Aceh in the eastern Indian Ocean. This network shows that Ottoman policy did not depend exclusively on direct naval confrontation. It also relied on regional partners whose geographic position could extend the reach of Ottoman strategy. A similar policy reappeared in 1564 when Lutfi was ordered to establish contact with Muslim communities across the Indian Ocean and encourage resistance against Portugal. He travelled through Calicut, Ceylon, Gujarat, and the Maldives and reached Aceh, where Portuguese shipping was seized.[25] The episode demonstrates the political function of collaboration: Ottoman power could mobilize local actors, while local powers could use Ottoman political and military backing to increase pressure on Portugal.

Reciprocal Economic Motives in the Aceh–Ottoman Maritime Strategic Alliance

The economic basis of Aceh's power was closely connected with maritime commerce. As a port-based political power, Aceh depended on trade and maritime capacity, and the political strength of its rulers was closely linked to their ability to participate in and control commercial activity. Pepper was particularly important. In 1518, pepper from Sumatra could be sold at a substantial margin in southern Chinese ports and at Calicut. To illustrate, in 1518, the price of pepper in Sumatra ranged from 42 to 63 Spanish reales[26] per Malay *bahar*.[27] In contrast, at South China ports, the price reached 570 to 770 Spanish reales per *bahar*. During the same period, the price of pepper in Calicut stood at 122 Spanish reales per bahar.[28] This implies that the margin on pepper between Sumatra and South China could reach 900 to 1,800 percent, whereas the margin relative to Calicut ranged from 193 to 290 percent.

23 Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age...*, p. 57.

24 *Ibid*.

25 *Ibid*., p. 124.

26 One *bahar* is equivalent to 3 *pikuls*, while 1 *pikul* equals 60 kilograms. Therefore, the weight of 1 *bahar* of pepper is 3 × 60 kilograms, or 180 kilograms. Heriyati Ongkodharma Untoro, *Kapitaliseme Pribumi Awal Kesultanan Banten 1522-1684; Kajian Arkeologi-Ekonomi* (Jakarta: Fakultas Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya Universitas Indonesia, 2007), p. 26.

27 The researcher employs the Spanish *real* as the unit of account based on the sources consulted. The focus is not on the value of the unit itself, but rather on the margins generated by the pepper trade between Sumatra, South China, and Calicut.

28 Marie-Sybille de Vienne, "Premiers Jalons…, p. 243.

Table 1: Comparative Pepper Prices and Commercial Profit Margins (1518)

Market Region	Price per Malay Bahar (Spanish Reales)	Price Ratio Relative to Sumatra
Sumatra (Origin)	42 – 63	100%
Calicut (India)	122	193% – 290%
South China Ports	570 – 770	900% – 1,800%

Aceh's control over pepper-producing areas enabled it to extend commercial activity toward the Red Sea. By 1526, Acehnese ships carrying pepper had reached the Red Sea,[29] and Portuguese reports from 1534 describe the interception of ships from Gujarat and Aceh near Bab al-Mandeb.[30] By the mid-1560s, approximately five Acehnese ships a year were reaching the Red Sea, carrying an estimated 1,400 tons of pepper in 1566.[31] These figures illustrate why maritime security was an economic necessity rather than a peripheral concern. Portuguese occupation of Malacca changed Aceh's commercial geography. Because the eastern coast of Sumatra became less secure for Muslim traders, Aceh developed the western coast as an alternative corridor toward Java.[32] Acehnese control of western ports and their resources of pepper and gold strengthened the sultanate's position. More than 2,000 bahar of pepper were estimated to have been transported annually from the western coast toward Aceh,[33] while the sultanate maintained strict control over foreign merchants and concentrated their access to the capital.[34]

The security of these routes was inseparable from the stability of state revenue. Maritime commerce generated income through pepper monopolies, port duties, customs, and charges on foreign vessels. Greater commercial activity increased the state's ability to finance administration, naval forces, for-

29 M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofsz, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago Between 1500 and About 1630* (Netherlands: The Hague Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), p. 145.

30 C.R. Boxer, "A Note on Portuguese Reactions to the Revival of the Red Sea Spice Trade and the Rise of Atjeh, 1540-1600", *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Desember 1969, p. 416.

31 *Ibid*., p. 419.

32 Djoko Marihandono and Bondan Kanumoyoso, *Rempah, Jalur Rempah, dan Dinamika Masyarakat Nusantara* (Jakarta: Direktorat Sejarah, Direktorat Kebudayaan, Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, tt), p. 6.

33 *Ibid*.

34 Gusti Asnan, *Dunia Maritim Pantai Barat Sumatra* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Ombak, 2019), p. 37.

tifications, and political influence. Consequently, a threat to shipping was simultaneously a threat to the fiscal and military capacity of the sultanate. Portuguese interference intensified this problem. The Portuguese *cartaz* system required ships in the Indian Ocean to obtain permission, report their cargoes and passengers, and pay duties.[35] Portuguese fleets and fortified positions were used to support this commercial monopoly, and Acehnese ships were repeatedly intercepted in 1534, 1554–1555, 1559, 1562, 1565, 1566, and 1567.[36] Economic competition had therefore become maritime coercion. The logic is consistent with Mahan's observation that merchant ships require secure ports and protection from their state, particularly during wartime.[37] Aceh could increase pepper production and control more producing regions, but these measures would not guarantee commercial benefits if Portuguese forces could interrupt the maritime route connecting production centres with international markets. Ottoman military assistance thus had an economic function: it could help secure the shipping system through which Aceh converted agricultural resources into international revenue.

The Ottoman Empire also had substantial economic interests in the Indian Ocean. Portuguese expansion redirected part of the spice trade around the Cape of Good Hope, reducing the flow of commodities through the traditional routes linking India and Southeast Asia to Hormuz, Aden, the Red Sea, and the eastern Mediterranean. The disruption affected Ottoman commercial interests because the empire's control of Egypt and the Levant provided revenue from the movement of goods. The scale of Portuguese redirection was significant. Portuguese shipments included large quantities of pepper and other spices through the Cape route. At the same time, reports from the early sixteenth century described serious shortages of spices in Mediterranean ports such as Alexandria and Beirut.[38] Salman Reis's report in 1525 specifically warned Ottoman authorities about Portuguese control of Indian Ocean commerce and its effect on Egyptian tax revenue and Red Sea trade.[39]

The Ottoman response was increasingly active. After the conquest of Egypt in 1517, the empire controlled the major Red Sea ports and therefore had a direct interest in the security of the maritime routes supplying them. At first the Ottoman government did not intervene extensively in the market and relied on customs revenues.[40] From the middle of the sixteenth centu-

35 Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese…*, p. 70.

36 C.R. Boxer, "A Note on Portuguese Reactions...", pp. 418-419.

37 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* (Boston: John Wilson & Son, 1890), p. 26.

38 Salih Ozbaran, *The Ottoman Response to European Expansion* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 1994), pp. 70-71.

39 Andrew C. Hess, "The Evolution of the Ottoman Seaborne Empire in the Age of the Oceanic Discoveries, 1453-1525", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 75, No. 7 (December 1970), p. 1914.

40 Giancarlo Casale, "The Ottoman Administration of the Spice Trade in the Sixteenth-Century Red

ry, however, the empire developed a more interventionist policy intended to increase the volume of spice trade and state revenue. By the late 1560s, an infrastructure had developed for purchasing spices for the sultan in overseas emporia and organizing annual convoys carrying pepper from Yemen to Egypt and Istanbul.[41] Ottoman policy thus required relations with the Muslim powers of the Indian Ocean. Trade through Calicut, Cannanore, and the Maldives helped reconnect Asian commodities with the Red Sea system. Aceh was particularly valuable because of its location and its control of important pepper-producing regions. The relationship with Aceh therefore offered the Ottoman Empire access to the eastern end of an interconnected commercial system. This logic became more explicit under Sokollu Mehmed Pasha. During the first years of his tenure as grand vizier, he developed plans for an anti-Portuguese alliance with Aceh and considered a canal connecting the Mediterranean and Suez to facilitate cargo and military movement.[42] In 1562, Aceh offered the Ottomans special trade concessions in exchange for artillery, military equipment, and Ottoman technical specialists. The exchange demonstrates that the economic relationship was reciprocal rather than one-directional. Aceh needed military technology to protect its commerce, while the Ottomans valued Aceh as a gateway to eastern commodities.

Religious Motives: The Protection of Pilgrims and Islamic Maritime Networks

Religion constituted a third major dimension. The pilgrimage to Mecca was a central religious obligation, and the maritime route from Southeast Asia to the Hijaz was embedded in the commercial geography of the Indian Ocean. Knowledge of Mecca and pilgrimage was present in Sumatra before the sixteenth century,[43] while the correspondence of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah al-Kahhar provides evidence that Muslims from Sumatra were undertaking pilgrimage during the period under discussion. Aceh served as a departure point for pilgrims from the archipelago. Pilgrims travelled on merchant ships,[44] commonly passing through India and then continuing toward Hadramaut or Jeddah.[45] The journey could take approximately six months

Sea and Persian Gulf", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 2, No. 49, Mei 2006, pp. 170-171.

41 *Ibid*., p. 171.

42 *Ibid*., p. 183

43 Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 84.

44 Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat* (Yogyakarta: Gading Publishing, 2012), p. 11.

45 *Ibid*.

in one direction.[46] Because pilgrims and merchants often travelled together, Portuguese attacks on Muslim shipping endangered pilgrims as well as commercial cargoes.

Portuguese interference had a direct religious consequence. The source material records Portuguese policies and statements that restricted Muslim pilgrimage and reflected hostility toward Muslim religious practice.[47] Portuguese authorities in Goa issued measures concerning Muslim pilgrims, while decrees sought to prevent Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.[48] The evidence cited in the source material also shows that Portuguese attacks on ships carrying Muslim pilgrims could involve the seizure, burning, and killing of passengers.[49] For Aceh, the problem was beyond its territorial reach. Portuguese forces could intercept pilgrims far from Acehnese waters, making unilateral protection difficult. The appeal to the Ottoman Empire therefore served a religious as well as strategic function. Aceh needed a power capable of protecting the maritime route beyond its own immediate jurisdiction. The religious motive was also visible in Acehnese resistance to Portugal. Portuguese hostility was interpreted in Acehnese political discourse not simply as a commercial challenge but as an attack by a non-Muslim power. The language used by Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah al-Kahhar in correspondence with the Ottoman court repeatedly referred to the Portuguese as "kafir". The terminology framed the conflict within a religious identity and transformed political resistance into a struggle in which Islamic solidarity could be mobilized.

The religious dimension of Acehnese resistance also involved the concept of *jihad*. Ulama held an important position in sixteenth-century Aceh, both within society and in relation to the sultan.[50] Their recognition could reinforce or weaken the legitimacy of the ruler. The growth of Aceh as an Islamic educational centre therefore provided an institutional environment in which religious interpretations could influence political mobilization.[51] The source material associates Sultan Alauddin Riayat Syah al-Kahhar with the ideal of the *ghazi* and with resistance against non-Muslim enemies. Nuruddin al-Raniri later described him as a *ghazi*,[52] while Mendes Pinto associated

46 *Ibid*.

47 Mahmood Kooria, "Killed the Pilgrims and Persecuted Them: Portuguese Estado da India's Encounters with the Hajj in the Sixteenth Century", in Umar Ryad (ed.), *The Hajj and Europe in the Age of Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), p. 25.

48 *Ibid*., p. 27.

49 *Ibid*., p. 25.

50 Amirul Hadi, *Aceh and The Portuguese; A Study of the Struggle of Islam in Southeast Asia 1500-1579* (Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 1994), p. 118.

51 W.F. Wertheim, *Indonesian Society in Transition; A Study of Social Change* (Netherland: W. van Hoeve Ltd – The Hague, 1964), p. 199.

52 Ermy Azziaty Rozali, "Aceh-Ottoman Relation in Bustan al-Salatin", *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, No. 29 (December 2014), p. 95. https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n29p93.

him with a strong commitment to *jihad*.[53] His correspondence with the Ottoman ruler likewise used religious language to describe the Portuguese threat. Aceh's relationship with the Ottoman Empire could therefore be represented as an alliance of Muslim powers facing a common enemy.

The Ottoman Empire possessed its own religious vocabulary for political and military action. From its early period, Ottoman rulers used the title *ghazi*, and Ottoman political culture associated the *ghazi* identity with defence of Islam and struggle against non-Muslim powers.[54] This identity was subsequently extended into the maritime sphere. Ottoman naval power developed in the Mediterranean, and the idea of religious struggle could accompany naval expansion.[55] When Portuguese power entered the Indian Ocean, the religious dimension of the Ottoman response became increasingly visible. The correspondence with Aceh illustrates this. Sultan Selim II's response to Acehnese requests described the Portuguese through the category of the unbelieving enemy and connected military action with the protection of Muslims and Islamic law.[56] Religious identity thus helped define the common enemy and legitimize assistance.

The Ottoman religious motive also concerned the protection of the Holy Cities and pilgrimage routes. Ottoman attention to the hajj preceded its conquest of the Hijaz.[57] Later, after the conquest of Syria, Egypt, and Arabia, the empire became a principal protector of Mecca and Medina and assumed responsibility for the security of pilgrimage routes.[58] Muslim rulers from other regions could therefore appeal to the Ottomans when their pilgrims faced obstacles. The Indian Ocean was simultaneously a commercial corridor and a pilgrimage corridor. Portuguese control and interception therefore threatened two Ottoman interests at once: the flow of commodities toward the Red Sea and the movement of pilgrims toward the Hijaz. This convergence helps explain why Ottoman assistance to Aceh could carry political, economic, and religious meanings simultaneously. The Ottoman response to Aceh in the correspondence of Sultan Selim II is particularly revealing. The Sultan responded to Acehnese complaints about Portuguese attacks on merchant and pilgrimage vessels by ordering ships, warships, artillery specialists, firearms, and Egyptian troops to be sent under a designated commander.[59] The mili-

53 Rebecca D. Catz, *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*…, p. 36.

54 Paul Wittek, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1958), pp. 13–15.

55 Andrew C. Hess, "The Evolution of the Ottoman...", p. 1906.

56 Baiquni Hasbi, *Relasi Kerajaan Aceh Darussalam dan Kerajaan Utsmani* (Banda Aceh: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Masyarakat Aceh, 2014), p. 149.

57 Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire; The Classical Age 1300-1600* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 56.

58 *Ibid*., p. 57.

59 Ismail Hakki Goksoy, "Ottoman-Aceh Relations as Documented in Turkish Sources" in R. Michael Feener, Patrick Daly, Anthony Reid (ed.), *Mapping the Acehnese Past* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011), p.

tary response thus embodied the religious commitment to Muslim protection while also serving the strategic and economic objective of securing maritime routes.

Synthesis of Motives and Resources

The convergence of strategic interests between Aceh and the Ottoman Empire was translated into concrete exchanges of resources, personnel, military capabilities, and commercial access. These exchanges were not constant or symmetrical, but varied according to the strategic needs and capabilities of both polities. The following table summarizes the principal forms of reciprocal exchange documented between 1538 and 1568.

Table 2: Chronology of Reciprocal Resources and Strategic Exchange between Aceh and the Ottoman Empire, 1538–1568

Year	Aceh → Ottoman Empire	Ottoman Empire → Aceh
1538–1539	Ports, strategic bases, and access to Aceh's maritime networks	Military personnel and war materials
1547	Access to Pasai and its maritime-commercial networks	Three galliots from the Red Sea and two ships from Jeddah, carrying Turkish soldiers/Janissaries
1561–1562	Envoys, pepper, and spices	Eight Turkish gunners
1562	16 quintals of pepper, silk, cinnamon, cloves, camphor, and other commodities	Ten artillery specialists/gunsmiths and Lutfi
1564–1565	Gold, black pepper, spices, pearls, diamonds, and precious stones	Weapons specialists and military experts
1566–1567	Pearls, diamonds, and rubies as payment or compensation	Weapons, ammunition, gunsmiths, engineers, and artillerymen

79. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004253599_005.

Year	Aceh → Ottoman Empire	Ottoman Empire → Aceh
1567–1568	Ports, operational bases, commodities, and local support	Artillery and artillery specialists; a planned expedition of 15 galleys and 2 barques, which was ultimately not fully realized

The chronology demonstrates that reciprocity between Aceh and the Ottoman Empire operated through complementary rather than equivalent resources. Aceh's contributions were primarily geographical, commercial, and network-based, including access to ports, maritime routes, commodities, and local support, whereas Ottoman contributions were concentrated in military personnel, artillery, weapons, technical expertise, and political support. The pattern also changed over time: early cooperation was characterized by military deployment and strategic access, while the intensified diplomatic exchanges of the 1560s increasingly involved identifiable commercial and technical exchanges. Reciprocity therefore did not mean an equal exchange of equivalent goods, but a functional exchange in which each side supplied resources that the other could not easily obtain on its own.

Maritime Power and Reciprocal Interests

The three motives become more coherent when placed in the maritime environment of the Indian Ocean. Mahan's concept of sea power is broader than naval strength alone. It encompasses the ability to use the sea for trade, navigation, communication, security, and warfare.[60] Ports, commercial shipping, maritime routes, and military protection are therefore parts of the same strategic system. This perspective clarifies why the Aceh–Ottoman relationship emerged where it did. Aceh possessed a strategically important location at the eastern entrance to the Indian Ocean, access to the Strait of Malacca, western Sumatran ports, and valuable pepper resources. The Ottoman Empire controlled Egypt and the Red Sea and had an interest in the western end of the same commercial system. The two powers therefore occupied different nodes of a connected maritime space.

The Portuguese challenge transformed these advantages into vulnerabilities. Portugal did not merely compete for commodities. It sought to regulate shipping through *cartaz*, patrols, fortified positions, and armed interception. Maritime commerce could consequently be controlled only by powers

60 Neeraj Singh, "Theory of Sea Power of A.T. Mahan", *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, Vol. 03, No. 03 (March 2018), p. 141.

able to protect routes. Aceh's economic strength could not be fully converted into political power if its ships were vulnerable to Portuguese interception. Similarly, Ottoman control of the Red Sea could not guarantee commercial revenue if the flow of eastern spices was disrupted before reaching Ottoman ports. Sea power therefore strengthens the explanation of both political and economic motives. Sovereignty depended partly on control of maritime access, while commercial prosperity depended on the security of maritime movement. The Ottoman relationship offered Aceh access to military expertise and technology that could compensate for the limitations of its own maritime capacity. Conversely, cooperation with Aceh extended Ottoman strategic reach toward the eastern Indian Ocean.

Shared interests alone do not explain the relationship. The two powers did not possess identical objectives. Aceh sought to preserve its sovereignty, strengthen military capability, protect trade, maintain maritime access, and protect pilgrims. The Ottoman Empire sought to defend the Red Sea, preserve commercial and pilgrimage networks, obtain eastern commodities, protect Muslim powers, and contain Portuguese expansion. Their common interest was therefore an intersection rather than a complete identity of interests. Holsti's theory of collaboration helps clarify this point. Collaboration can develop when actors possess overlapping interests, values, or objectives and expect that the other party can contribute resources that are necessary for achieving those interests.[61] In the Aceh–Ottoman case, Aceh required a military capability that was stronger than what it could immediately mobilize, while the Ottomans required local partners capable of extending the struggle against Portugal into the eastern Indian Ocean.

The division of resources was complementary. Aceh offered geographical position, access to local networks, ports, and connections with Muslim powers in the eastern Indian Ocean. The Ottomans offered firearms, artillery, technical expertise, military experience, and political support. Collaboration was therefore possible precisely because neither side possessed all the resources required to pursue its objectives alone. The 1562 trade concession is particularly important because it demonstrates reciprocity. Aceh offered the Ottoman Empire special commercial access to medicines and spices from Maluku, Banda, Java, and other islands in exchange for artillery, military equipment, and Ottoman technical specialists. The exchange shows that Ottoman assistance cannot be interpreted solely as charity or religious solidarity. It was embedded in a relationship in which both sides could obtain resources of strategic value.

Reciprocity also explains why the intensity of the relationship was not constant. Cooperation depended on the availability of resources and the capacity of each side to fulfil commitments. Shared religion and common op-

61 K.J. Holsti, *Politik Internasional; Kerangka Analisa* (Jakarta Pusat: Pedoman Ilmu Jaya, 1987), p. 652.

position to Portugal could create a basis for cooperation, but practical collaboration still depended on material capacity. The delay of Ottoman assistance when the empire faced a rebellion in Yemen in 1568 demonstrates this limitation.[62] The episode is analytically significant because it shows that common identity did not automatically produce unlimited support.

Conclusion

The relationship between the Aceh Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire in 1538–1568 emerged from a multidimensional convergence of political, economic, and religious motives. Aceh sought to preserve its sovereignty, strengthen its military capability, protect pepper-based maritime commerce, secure maritime connections between Sumatra, India, and the Red Sea, and obtain external support within a changing regional power structure. The Ottoman Empire, meanwhile, had political, economic, and religious interests in extending its influence in the Indian Ocean, limiting Portuguese expansion, and protecting commercial and pilgrimage connections linking the Indian Ocean with the Red Sea. Religious solidarity therefore formed an important dimension of the relationship, but it operated alongside political and economic considerations rather than replacing them.

These motives converged within the shared strategic space of the Indian Ocean and created conditions for reciprocal cooperation. Aceh contributed geographical access, ports, local maritime networks, and commercial connections, while the Ottoman Empire possessed greater military, technological, and political resources. The relationship was therefore characterized not by identical interests or equal capabilities, but by complementary resources and converging strategic needs. From the perspective of sea power, the strategic importance of ports, maritime routes, commerce, and military capabilities helps explain the wider context in which the relationship developed. Collaboration theory, in turn, helps interpret how actors with different capabilities and interests could cooperate when the expected benefits of cooperation complemented their respective needs. The principal finding is that the Aceh–Ottoman relationship constituted a contingent and reciprocal collaboration in which political, economic, and religious motives generated the basis for cooperation, while differences in resources shaped the form and extent of that cooperation.

The main contribution of this study is to integrate these dimensions into a single interpretation of Aceh–Ottoman relations. Rather than treating political resistance, commercial interests, religious solidarity, and maritime strategy as separate explanations, the study shows how they interacted within the geopolitical structure of the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean. The case of

62 Anthony Reid, "Sixteenth Century Turkish Influence in Western Indonesia", *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (September 1969), p. 404.

Aceh also indicates that non-European actors participated actively in shaping regional political and maritime relations through external diplomacy, commercial networks, and the mobilization of complementary resources. This finding does not imply that Aceh and the Ottoman Empire pursued identical objectives or possessed comparable capabilities; rather, their cooperation developed precisely because their differences created opportunities for mutual benefit. The analysis therefore contributes to a more nuanced understanding of early modern Muslim interstate relations by demonstrating how asymmetric actors could develop reciprocal cooperation without eliminating differences in power or interest.

The study is limited by the fragmented and uneven nature of the surviving sources, particularly for the period between the Ottoman expedition of 1538 and the intensification of diplomatic contacts in the 1560s. These limitations make some aspects of Acehnese decision-making and the continuity of diplomatic exchanges difficult to reconstruct with certainty. The findings should therefore be understood within the evidentiary limits of the available Ottoman, Acehnese, Portuguese, and other contemporary sources.

Further research could strengthen this interpretation by examining additional Ottoman archival materials alongside Acehnese and Portuguese sources, particularly for the period in which diplomatic communication between Aceh and the Ottoman Empire remains poorly documented. Comparative studies of other Muslim maritime relationships in the Indian Ocean could also determine whether the pattern identified in the Aceh–Ottoman case—converging but non-identical interests, complementary resources, and reciprocal cooperation—can be observed in other early modern inter-state relationships. Such research would help clarify the broader applicability of the analytical framework developed in this study while remaining grounded in the specific historical evidence of each case.

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