

INDONESIA
Aceh

Cultural Cities Profile
East Asia



24 May 2021
Tom Fering / creative consultancy

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Special Thanks

Commissioned by the British Council, the research was led by Dr. Tom Fleming, director, Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy (TFCC); Nana Yu-I Lee, senior researcher, TFCC; Chris Joynes, consultant researcher, TFCC. The Indonesia research teams were led by Dwinita Larasati at ICCN, with support from Arianti Ayu Puspita. The CIPG research team were Anesthesia Novianda, Ferzya Farhan and Muhammad Rinaldi Camil. The Tanahindie research team was led by Anwar Rachman, and included Muhaimin Zulhair, Fitriani A Dalay, Fauzan Al Ayyuby, Aziziah Diah Aprilya Wilda Yanti Salam, Ade Awaluddin Firman, Ruth Onduko, and Rafsanjani. ICCN's key city informants were: for Surabaya: Hafsoh Mubarak; for Surabaya: Vicky Arief; for Surabaya: Ashari Ramadhan; for Surabaya: Ronny Lopies; for Jayapura: Murda; for Bandung: Galih Sedayu; for Surabaya: Greg Wuryanto; for Surabaya: Akhmad 'Adin' Khoridin; for Surakarta: Liliek Setiawan; for Aceh: Zulhadi Usman.

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Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy is the leading international consultancy for culture and the creative economy. We offer research, strategy and policy leadership across the creative, cultural and arts sectors. We offer technical expertise, strategic thinking and the tools to position creativity to the heart of society. With offices in London and Porto and associates in 12 countries, we are an international agency operating in every region. <http://tfconsultancy.co.uk/>

Indonesia Creative Cities Network (ICCN) is a hub organisation for cross-communities forum, connecting 200+ cities/regencies from all over Indonesia that are committed to implement the 10 Principles of Indonesia Creative Cities that was declared in 2015. ICCN published the White Book of Indonesia Creative Cities (2017) that adapts the 10 Principles to the Indonesian government's KPI, and is developing a dashboard of Creative Cities Index as a tool for local governments to make policies/ regulations based on the real time creative economy data of their respective regions. <https://iccn.or.id/>

Centre for Innovation Policy and Governance (CIPG) is a research-based advisory group which aspires to excel in the area of innovation, policy and governance. Considered to be among the first research-based advisory groups, CIPG grows to be an open-minded and multicultural think tank with keen interest in building Indonesian research capacities across many sectors. <https://cipg.or.id/en/>

Tanahindie was established in 1999, composed of personnel from various backgrounds (researchers, authors, advocates, craftspeople, lecturers, students, social workers, and housewives). Exploring urban social development from the perspective of arts and culture, the organisation's activities include research, seminars, exhibitions, reviews, and publication. <https://tanahindie.org/>

Introducing Banda Aceh

Banda Aceh is the capital city of the autonomous Aceh Province (Daerah Istimewa/ special district) in Indonesia. It is located alongside the Aceh River at the north-western tip of Sumatra Island, facing the Andaman Sea. The city is known as “The Doorway to Mecca” (“Serambi Mekkah”), since historically it was a transit place for Muslim pilgrims who journey by ship to Mecca from the east. Visited by Marco Polo in 1292 and Ibn Battutah in 1345, Banda Aceh was known as Bandar Aceh Darussalam, ruled by the Sultan Iskandar Muda.

The city was built by Sultan Johan Syah in 1205 as the capital of the Sultanate of Aceh, making it, at 816 years, the oldest Islamic City in Southeast Asia region. As the capital city, Banda Aceh Darussalam has become the centre of economic, political, social, and cultural activities; it has also been known as a centre for Islamic education, attracting students from Middle East, India, and other countries. As a trading centre, the city was visited by global traders from Arabia, Turkey, China, Europe, and India; some people often say that ACEH is an abbreviation of Arab, Chinese, Europe, and (H)india. These visitors, both students and migrant traders, eventually settled in Aceh and married to local women, resulting in a variety of cultures. Today’s data shows that there are 8 ethnic groups in Aceh Province, where 12 languages are spoken, although in Banda Aceh itself, Indonesian language is used as the main language. The diversity is evident at some historical corners of the city, such as the Chinatown in Peunayong Village, and Turkish graves in Gampong Bitai.

The Dutch occupied the city in 1873, triggering the subsequent Acehese War that went on until 1903. Banda Aceh remains as a centre of Acehese separatist groups after Aceh was incorporated into Indonesia as an autonomous province in 1949. The separatist movement has less profile in recent years, following a truce with the Indonesian Government after the loss of thousands of people and severe damage to the city due to a tsunami in December 2004.

Administratively, Aceh Special Region is led by a governor and vice governor. However, there is a special leader who regulates specific matters related to customs and culture, known as Wali Nanggroe (His Excellency Al Mukarram Maulana Al Mudabbir Al Malik), with an office called Wali Nanggroe Institute (Lembaga Wali Nanggroe/LWN). Aceh also has a special council related to adat or tradition, known as Majelis Adat Aceh (Aceh Tradition Council). Aceh is the only province in Indonesia that applies Islamic Law (sharia) and promotes Islamic tourism as its uniqueness.



Banda Aceh Map

Photo © Google Maps - <https://maps.google.com>

City Vision and Branding

Under the branding of Banda Aceh Smart City, the city aims to show the quality of its spatial planning through the development of city parks that are comfortable, safe, and appropriate for children, youth and the elderly.

The vision of Banda Aceh is to be “a glorious city within sharia framework”, with the mission to implement the Islamic law, next to other missions related to basic infrastructure and facilities.



Banda Aceh is unique and different from other cities in Indonesia, because it carries the concept of Islamic sharia in its culture. So almost every policy formed in this city is influenced by this concept. In fact, in performing arts, performances must consider politeness and Islamic principles, such as closed clothings. If there is a show from abroad, the women performers must cover their bodies, from neck to feet

Zulhadi Usman
(interviewed 9 Feb 2020)

The Baiturrahman Mosque

Photo © Shutterstock, 2020



Cultural Infrastructure

Since 2017, after being a part of the Department of Tourism, cultural services have become the responsibility of the Department of Education. Through this Department, the municipality allocates funds for culture-related activities, including the management of cultural wealth (restoration of 3 cultural heritage sites in 2018, maintenance of cultural heritage graves in 2017-2020, establishment of a city heritage experts team, and school visits to historical sites), a programme for cultural diversity management (school and community arts festivals, cultural heritage promotion for gampong and jupel officials), and a programme for cultural value management (arts training for students, art teachers, communities, historical observers and people in cultural sectors).

In 2019, Banda Aceh started the Smart City project, with a vision “to become an innovative and competitive Islamic smart city”; focusing on three important aspects: Islamic Smart City, Innovative and Competitive. In order to achieve the vision, Banda Aceh Smart City formulates 6 dimensions for its implementation: smart governance, smart branding, smart economy, smart living, smart society, and smart environment.

The tourism sector is handled by Forum Silaturahmi Aceh Meusapat (Dialog Pembangunan Pariwisata Aceh), or Aceh Meusapat Hospitality Forum (Aceh Tourism Development Dialogue). Their priorities in 2020 were the development of: tourism villages, leading tourism areas (Sabang for diving and cruise ship, North and East Aceh for cultural and religious destinations, etc.), infrastructure, and capacity building in tourism marketing and tourism institutions.

According to the Banda Aceh City Culture and Tourism Office report, the city contains numerous notable heritage assets, including 44 heritage cemeteries, 6 mosques, 6 monuments, 1 traditional house, 13 old buildings, and 5 historical places. Among the most iconic ones are Baiturrahman Mosque (built in 1612 under Iskandar Muda Sultanate), Krong Bade or Rumoh Aceh (vernacular Acehnese architecture for an earthquake-proof house), Gunongan (a 17th century bath and pleasure gardens on the banks of Aceh River), Turkey Village in Bitay, and Kerkhof Peucut (a 3.5 hectares cemetery complex where more than 2,200 Dutch soldiers were buried along with other troops during the 1873-1904 Aceh War).

Tengku di Bitay's GRAVE

Photo © Banda Aceh Tourism, 2021





The development of the creative economy is in line with the current focus of Banda Aceh development, that is to push the tourism sector. Particularly in Ulee Lheue area, a culinary destination of Banda Aceh is being prepared, especially for Sanger coffee, timphan (steamed cake made of rice flour, coconut milk and banana) and kuah beulangong (a curry-like dish, using beef, mutton, or young jackfruit). We are also developing a representative art and culture stage at the city centre.'

Aminullah Usman,
Mayor of Banda Aceh, 2020¹

¹ <https://bandaacehkota.go.id/berita/23568/geliat-aminullah-membangun-ekonomi-kreatif-di-banda-aceh.html>



Rumoh Aceh or Aceh House,
a traditional architectural style
of housing

Photo © acehtourism.travel, 2020

Cultural infrastructure and hubs – a sample



I fully support this Aceh embroidery arts in Gampong Daya Daboh. In the future, I hope this industry uses the newest technology; not only the embroidery machines and printers, but also adapts to digital technology to accelerate the onboarding mechanisms (access to e-commerce ecosystem). The Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy will facilitate this digitalisation development.

Sandiaga Salahuddin Uno,
Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, 2021

Trans Kutaraja²

Banda Aceh Municipality operates 92 bus units under the name Trans Kutaraja. This transportation facility is free for students in Banda Aceh. Every student will also be given a paid card, which costs far below the standard rates. Currently, several bus stops are being completed, covering 6 corridors. This enhances access to cultural sites and encourages participation.

Musyawarah Rencana Aksi Perempuan (Musrena), or Women's Action Plan Deliberation³

Banda Aceh Municipality provides a space for women to express themselves through Musyawarah Rencana Aksi Perempuan/Musrena (Women's Action Plan Deliberation). This programme is an integral part of the planning process for Banda Aceh. The specific purpose of this planning method is to strengthen the position of women in decision-making and policy processes which have been dominated by men. Musrena is a democratic, strategic, participatory, and political forum for women to be able to contribute and be actively involved in development. Musrena is also a forum and place for learning for women to increase their capacity to voice their aspirations in the public space. Meanwhile, the general objective of Musrena is to make Banda Aceh a gender-friendly city. Culture and Equality: Women and Child Care

Friendly Village Programme⁴

The Mayor of Banda Aceh appealed to the keuchik (head of the gampong or village) to provide more space for women in village development, by activating the Balee Inong (women forum at a gampong level).

Tsunami Museum⁵

Aceh Tsunami Museum is a symbolic reminder of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami disaster. The museum is also an educational centre, and will function as an emergency disaster shelter in case the area is ever hit by a tsunami again.

² <https://www.bandaacehtourism.com/id/a/bus-trans-kutaraja/cara-naik-trans-kutaraja>

³ <https://bappeda.bandaacehkota.go.id/program-strategis/musrena/>

⁴ <https://naturalaceh.org/>

⁵ <https://museumtsunami.id>

Tikar Pandan Community⁶

Tikar Pandan Community is a cultural institution active since 2003. It carries out research, development and preservation of Acehese arts and culture, while deepening the arts of Sidalupa, a folk theatre/performance from West Aceh.

Kanot Bu Community⁷

According to the Indonesia Collective Map 2010-2020 (Whiteboard Journal and British Council Indonesia, 2020), Kanot Bu was originally born as a criticism against the emergence of political parties after the Aceh conflicts ended. With the initiative to continue being critical about the political situation in Aceh, Kanot Bu does not use counter-political instruments, but chooses to use arts and cultural activities that can encourage the general public to engage and collaborate in creative ways. Therefore, they use art and culture as the tools of activism.

DiLo Banda Aceh⁸

DiLo is a place for creative talent, startups and communities to collaborate, mainly activities involving digital technology, through pre-startup development programmes.

**Rumoh Aceh or Aceh House,
a traditional architectural style
of housing**

Photo © Glory Travel, 2018

⁶ <https://sinarpidie.co/news/sanggar-kesenian-sidalupa-kampung-peulekung-dan-komunitas-tikar-pandan-gelar-workshop-dan-pertunjukan-kesenian-sidalupa/index.html>

⁷ <https://kanotbu.com/profil/>

⁸ <https://dilo.id/banda-aceh>



Festivals – a sample

Aceh Cultural Week⁹

Aceh Cultural Week is the largest event held by the Aceh Provincial Culture and Tourism Office. This once-every-five-year event is a mandatory agenda that must be carried out in order to promote the cultures of Acehnese people, and also as a platform to unite this diverse society.

International Sanger Day Festival¹⁰

Sanger is a traditional Acehnese drink that is mixed with coffee, sweet condensed milk, and sometimes a bit of sugar. The coffee drink is brewed 'drawn', filtered in a cone-shaped sieve and then pulled so that bubbles appear on the surface when poured into a glass. It has a slightly brownish colour. Since 2013, young people in Aceh have started Sanger International Day or Sanger Day on October 12; initiated by Fahmi Yunus, a humanitarian worker who is also a lecturer at Ar Raniry State Islamic University (UIN), Banda Aceh.

Saman Festival¹¹

Since UNESCO recognised Saman Dance as an intangible heritage in 2011, the Aceh government has promoted Saman internationally. The Saman Festival, which was originally held in Gayo Mountain Festival (Gamifest), has been made as one of the Top 100 National Events by the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism. Apart from being fully supported by the Aceh government, the Saman Festival activities are also supported by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture.

⁹ <https://youtu.be/SgIHQZYEv8U>

¹⁰ <https://youtu.be/NDxE7e98LqM>

¹¹ <https://kumparan.com/acehkini/festival-saman-di-gayo-lues-menjaga-warisan-aceh-untuk-dunia-1rhY8U9RubW>

Movers and Shakers – a sample

Zulhadi Usman¹²

Zulhadi Usman is a graphic designer, particularly in font types, founder of Jroh Production, and a member of Indonesia Creative Cities Network. He has been assisting and collaborating with the municipality, particularly during the process of city branding development for Banda Aceh.

Azhari Aiyub¹³

Azhari Aiyub is the co-founder of Dokarim Writing School (a school for creative writing) and Tikar Pandan Community. His collection of short stories, titled “Perempuan Pala” (Women Nutmeg), published in 2004, was nominated for the Khatulistiwa Literary Award. He received the Free Word Award from Poets of All Nations in the Netherlands in 2005. Woman Nutmeg has been translated into English and was given an introduction by anthropologist James T. Siegel. Azhari is also one of the initiators and managers of the first Human Rights Museum in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, which was established in 2011 in Banda Aceh.

Raisa Kamila¹⁴

Raisa Kamila, born and raised in Banda Aceh, is a writer, researcher and public advocate particularly on the issues of decolonisation, women, and popular culture studies. Following her graduation from the Faculty of Philosophy, Universitas Gadjah Mada (Yogyakarta), she pursued a Master’s degree in Colonial and Global History at Leiden University (The Netherlands) through ENCOMPASS-Cosmopolis scholarship in 2015. With Perkawanan Perempuan Penulis (Friendship of Women Writers), Raisa published “Tank Merah Muda: Cerita-Cerita yang Tercecer dari Reformasi” (Pink Tank: Stories that are Scattered from Reformation) in 2019, with support from Cipta Media Ekspresi. Her short stories collection was published by Buku Mojok in 2020. She currently works as an editor for Pustaka Pias.

¹² <https://www.jrohcreative.com/> / <https://www.linkedin.com/in/zulhadi-usman-989932188/>

¹³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfPk17_P_LA

¹⁴ https://www.instagram.com/raikala_/

M. Yusuf Bombang (a.k.a. Apa Kaoy)¹⁵

Yusuf Bombang is an Acehnese artist and cultural observer, actor/director of Acehnese Theatre and StoryTeller (Tukang Hikayat and Hiem), and a columnist. In 2018 he invented a musical instrument called “gedombang”, which he performed himself, along with a storytelling, during the Festival of Traditional Art and Cultural Parade in Bireuen Regency and the Cultural Festival at Al Muslim University. The instrument was then performed in Singapore, Malaysia, Jakarta, and other Indonesian cities. He is the driver behind the reemergence of Rapa’ Uroh or Rapa’i Pasee, a traditional musical instrument similar to a drum/ percussion from North Aceh, which he combined with poetry reading since 1990s. The instrument was eventually declared as a national intangible heritage by the Ministry of Education and Culture.¹⁶

**The Kerkhof
Cemetery Complexes**

Photo © Si Gam Acèh - wikipedia.org

¹⁵ <https://aceh.tribunnews.com/2018/11/08/seniman-kreatif-aceh-yusuf-bombang-alias-apa-kaoy-ciptakan-alat-musik-gedombang>

¹⁶ Some of his notes about Aceh traditions are available at: <https://hikayataceh.com/author/myusufbombang/>

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