Having authored numerous authoritative papers on the Aceh conflict, Edward Aspinall has finally provided us with a book. *Islam and Nation* has been highly anticipated, and it does not disappoint.

Aspinall focuses on three interrelated questions: why Acehnese nationalism emerged as a mass phenomenon, why Islam did not play a more prominent role and how changes in nationalism contributed to peace. The title may be a little misleading, as *Islam and Nation* tilts towards nation, with Islam playing a supporting role. The chapters are roughly chronological, each guided by distinct theoretical approaches. This makes for reading which is neither theory driven nor simply descriptive.

The reader will appreciate the book’s considerable empirical depth. Particularly impressive is Aspinall’s detective work on Hasan di Tiro and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). He notes that, in the 1950s, di Tiro framed the Darul Islam Rebellion as anti-communist, establishing links to leading American cold warriors. The discussion of GAM historiography, “a textbook case—indeed, almost a parody—of ethnohistory” (69), makes for lively reading. Some readers may criticize Aspinall for being too critical of the rebels, but they will be pressed to challenge him empirically. He also notes that while the rebels were at times predatory, they were also genuinely popular.

In addition to impeccable empirics, the book offers a range of analytical contributions. Aspinall argues that there is no evidence of Acehnese national identity until quite recently. The Sultanate was cosmopolitan, predominantly a Malay Kingdom, while the Dutch War and Darul Islam rebellion were sustained by a faith largely opposed to ethnic traditions. So where did Aceh’s ethnic nationalism originate? Boldly, Aspinall suggests that Acehnese ethnic nationalism was partly a product of Aceh’s *de jure* special autonomy and Indonesian praise for Aceh’s distinctive traditions and historical contributions. Ironically, the New Order’s banal celebration of provincial identities and Acehnese “specialness” helped create a nation in waiting.

Any book that says so much will likely meet with some objections. I feel that by asking whether nations have ancient roots or are modern creations, Aspinall engages a debate which is largely settled. Many authors accept that these are not mutually exclusive. Ancient traits are used for new purposes, “a novel recombination of existing elements” (Anthony Smith, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 1992, 72).

Secondly, Aspinall asks why Islam played a minor role in a region known for Islamic struggle. His primary response is that each side was Muslim, making Islam a dead end for emphasizing difference. Though not without merit, I found this unsatisfying. How precisely does shared faith
influence the conflict? At times, the explanation seems structural, where the conflict naturally remains non-religious: “a logic of identity construction and differentiation...drove [the Acehnese] to deemphasize Islam” (195). This structural argument seems apolitical, at odds with a book about elite constructions of nationalism, and also with Aspinall’s evidence that early GAM members were Darul Islam veterans and that some ground GAM forces saw the conflict as Islamic. At other points, the explanation seems instrumental, with GAM leaders steering the conflict away from Islam. But did they steer it this way because it would not work, or because it was against their interests? If it was against their interests, the same religion point becomes largely irrelevant. GAM leaders lack religious credentials and world views and worked hard to do what the MNLF could not do, that is to maintain control of a nationalist rebellion.

Finally, I feel the nationalism at the core of this book is centred on elites, providing the reader with little guidance on micro-level dynamics. Aspinall mentions that village chiefs “were particularly likely to defect” to the GAM (159), while most Ulama were co-opted by the state (205). He does not explain why these community leaders behaved differently; his claims are supported by scant evidence, and he also states that chiefs “served two masters” (159) and that many rural Ulama supported the rebels (98). Related to this is why people follow the nationalism constructed for them by leaders. Aspinall seems to downplay the importance of human rights abuses in providing a reason to follow. The author hopes to “move beyond” (51) human rights grievances; without the frames provided by leaders, Acehnese may have viewed “military high-handedness” as “unfair and irritating but also as banal and unavoidable” (82). But abuses echo throughout his interviews and, in concluding, Aspinall is more generous, calling human rights abuses “the most important” factor in sustaining the conflict (250).

Quibbles such as this cannot dampen my enthusiasm for this book. It should be read by anyone interested in Southeast Asian politics, Indonesia, nationalism, civil wars and Islamic politics. Islam and Nation will be the account of record for what was Acehnese separatism.

The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

Shane Joshua Barter


Michael Rockefeller is perhaps best known for the wing of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art that bears his name and the Asmat art inside that he collected on his ill-fated journey to that region of New Guinea in the