

## Teaching Morality with Acehese Idioms in Indonesia

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### Abstract

*Every society has its local pearls of wisdom in educating its generations. In the western part of Indonesia, Acehese society frequently uses figurative language, like idioms, as a tool for teaching morality to their generations. Even though research on local society's use of local wisdom to educate their generations has existed, research on the use of idioms in the Acehese language is scant. This study investigated whether idioms in the Acehese language contain educational values. In doing so, this study used interviews to collect data and involved 14 respondents from seven districts in Aceh that use a similar dialect of the Acehese language, including Aceh Utara, Aceh Timur, Lhokseumawe, Bireuen, Aceh Besar, Pidie, and Banda Aceh. The results showed ten hand-related idiomatic expressions in the Acehese language fall into pure idioms and semi-literal idioms. The idioms are used to teach moral values, such as encouragement to work, hardworking, responsibility, diligence, creativity, and many more. In conclusion, there is a nexus between the Acehese hand-related idioms in the Acehese society in Indonesia and the educational values they embrace.*

### Keywords

Acehese idioms; cognitive linguistics; hand-related idioms; educational values



## I. Introduction

It is customary that people of all cultures use idioms in their daily communication (Bortfeld, 2003; Erman & Warren, 2000; Orfan, 2020), and so do Acehese people who live on the northern tip of Sumatra island, Indonesia. Using idioms in society is not without purpose. In the Acehese society, for instance, idioms are not only ornaments in speaking but also used as the soft tool through which they transfer moral values embedded in them to their generations. That is why idioms in the society are inherited from generation to generation.

Despite the frequent use of idioms, their meanings are hard to understand by all people today, especially young generations, as occurs in Aceh province, Indonesia (Muliawati et al., 2019). As such, the process of transferring moral values is hampered. Hence, learning idioms is crucial for those learning linguistics and learning other disciplines. The students learn idioms in their mother tongue and find their equivalences in the English language. They will not translate the idioms in a language into English but understand the meanings and equivalences in English. Many scholars argue that idioms are an essential part of English vocabulary. Therefore, it is necessary for EFL learners need to master English idiomatic expressions to achieve native-like proficiency (Nation & Meara, 2002) and to develop EFL learners' sociolinguistic, grammatical and textual competence (Littlemore & Low, 2006).

Scholars argue it is essential to learn idioms by the speakers or learners of a language for achieving metalinguistic awareness (Maltese et al., 2012) because the lack of knowledge of idioms may harm relationships if what is said by a speaker is wrongly responded to by a listener (Alhaysony, 2017). EFL learners who avoid using idioms may make them sound unnatural and influenced (Cooper, 1999). Moreover, English is English is a language of idiomaticity in which there are a large number of figures of speech, phrasal verbs, and idioms (Orfan, 2020). Besides, learning idioms in a language can pave the way for understanding the culture of the society, and the use of idioms by EFL learners can enable them to speak English fluently and naturally (Ayed, 2008). For instance, we can understand what is used to express or represent something or a particular situation through the idioms. However, different cultures have different conventional knowledge that motivates the construction of idioms. For instance, the English culture often uses milk for the headwork, as in *Do not cry for over spilled milk*; the Indonesian language uses rice, as in *Nasi telah jadi bubur*.

In Aceh, there are several tribal languages spoken, which are rich in figurative languages such as idioms, commonly used in daily interactions in society (Muliawati et al., 2019). In the English language, most metaphors are bodily-motivated, and "it turned out that the most productive body part was the human hand, accounting for nearly 100 idioms" (Kövecses, 2001). Similarly, in the Acehnese culture, many idioms are related to body parts, especially hands (*jaro*, in the Acehnese language). The idioms with the headword *jaro* (hand) are culturally motivated in the Acehnese culture, such as "*peumat jaro*" and "*mat jaro malém*," which have different meanings. The former describes how a dispute is settled, whereas the latter is part of the marriage process. However, some Acehnese young generations do not understand the meanings of the idioms.

Learning idioms of a language is crucial to improving one's language competence. Teaching/learning idioms cannot be avoided or put off for a later stage since they are a significant part of figurative language, and their use by EFL learners can help them improve their communicative competence (Khan & Can Daşkin, 2014). The reason is that native speakers of a language often use idioms in speaking in a public place. It will not be easy to understand what the speakers say for those who do not have knowledge of the idioms used (e.g., Alhaysony, 2017). Accordingly, the responses will be enormously different from the expected ones, resulting in miscommunication (Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2017). Therefore, Khonbi and Sadeghi (2017) suggest that learners learn idioms to have idiomatic competence. Idiomatic competence refers to the ability to correctly comprehend and use idioms in different socio-cultural contexts with no mental effort and how native speakers use them (Liontas, 1999).

However, the literature shows that it is difficult to understand an idiom unless to learn it through the culture to which it belongs. As found in Orfan's (2020) research, Afghan students' difficulties mainly came from a lack of cultural knowledge behind idioms, a lack of analogs for English idioms in their first language, and a lack of context. Furthermore, students used numerous strategies to learn and understand idioms. The study recommends that Afghan EFL instructors incorporate idioms in their teaching activities. Another research by Ta'amneh (2021) found that the most commonly used strategies were predicting the meaning of the idioms, translating them to the first language, guessing the meaning of idiomatic expressions from the context, depending on verbal and visual information, and looking up unfamiliar idioms in the dictionary. Concerning this, Spears (1996, cited in Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2017) states that it is difficult to learn idioms because "their application ranges from the formal to clichéd and from informal to folksy/slang, including proverbs." Another difficulty in understanding idioms is that they contain

conventional knowledge motivating them (Yu-Hua & Wang, 2016). For this reason, this study applies to conduct to add insights into the discussion on idioms from the context of the Acehese language in Indonesia.

Literature shows that many languages use body parts in their idioms. It has also been argued that bodies are cultural objects (Gibbs, 2005). The body parts idioms used daily in conversation express the linguistic richness of a given language (Kovecses, 2004). Lakoff and Johnson (1999) assert that human bodily experience represents the main instrument for comprehending non-concrete concepts. Idioms are shortened writings; they use the command of language to express sensations, opinions, visions, needs, and experiences directly, typically by common sense.

Many studies have existed about the body-parts idioms (e.g., Al-Mohizea, 2017; Bataineh & Al-Shaikhli, 2020; Kemertelidze & Giorgadze, 2020; Wongthai, 2015). Kemertelidze and Giorgadze (2020), among others, exemplified the idioms "an arm and a leg" to describe anything considered being costly, "the apple of one's eye" to describe a person or a thing that is very precious and loved, and "foot in mouth" to mean to say or do something accidentally offensive or embarrassing. Bataineh and Al-Shaikhli (2020) analyzed the body parts idioms in the Arabic and English languages to express feelings. All these idioms explicitly involve body parts.

Despite these studies, to the best of our knowledge, the study that sees the nexus of the Acehese hand-related idioms related to educational values is relatively few, such as those by Muliawati et al. (2019). We argue that exploring the educational values in the idioms in the Acehese language can help learners in Aceh learn the Islamic educational values while learning the English language. In this way, the learning will be more meaningful for the students. Hence, they will be knowledgeable in the Acehese idioms as well. This study, therefore, focuses on the hand-related idioms in the Acehese language, which contain Islamic values.

The research questions of this study are: What are types of idioms related to hands for teaching morality in the Acehese language? What educational values embedded in the hand-related idioms for teaching morality in the Acehese society?

## II. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Defining idioms

There are many definitions of idiom proposed by linguists. Sinclair (1991) defines *idiom* as "a group of two or more words which are chosen together in order to produce a specific meaning or effect in speech or writing" (p. 172). Kövecses and Szabó (1996) define idioms as linguistic expressions with unpredicted meanings in the same vein. Orfan (2020, p. 3) defines it "as an expression whose meaning cannot be figured out from its constituent parts." Gramley and Pátzold (2003) add that an idiom is longer than a word but shorter than a sentence (p. 55). Idiom refers to "a linguistic device used to convey and perceive cultural aspects, opinions and abstract meanings" (Al-Kadi, 2015). According to Grant (2005), it necessitates contexts when defining an idiom as one type of conventionalized multiword expression. These definitions suggest that an idiom is a combination of two and more words to produce a specific meaning, different from the literal meaning in a particular context. Idiomatic expressions, according to Fernando (2000), refer to "conventionalized multiword expressions which are often but not always non-literal" (p. 1).

Furthermore, scholars stated that the idiom has several features, such as conventionality, figuration, and proverbiality (Croft & Cruse, 2004; Kövecses & Szabó,

1996). By conventionality, they refer to the unpredictability of the meaning of idioms based on their parts. Besides, idioms are inflexible because of their unchangeable and restricted orders. Figuration refers to idioms that have a metaphoric meaning, and proverbiality means that idioms have proverbial meaning because of many idioms from conventional proverbs.

## 2.2 Types of idioms: pure idioms, semi-literal idioms, and literal idioms

Many idioms are related to the themes of nature, animals, body parts, specific names, food, colors, and sports exist in languages. They represent the personality, appearance, work, health issues, and more (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2010). Besides, Fernando (1996) classifies idioms into three sub-classes: pure idioms, semi-literal idioms, and literal idioms. A pure idiom is a type of idioms whose meaning cannot be understood by combining the words' meanings that constitute the phrase. Pure idioms are characterized by the feature of semantic opacity that often causes great difficulty for language learners (Yu-Hua & Wang, 2016). The second class is a semi-literal idiom, which according to Fernando (1996), refers to an idiom with at least one literal and one figurative meaning. He exemplifies the idiom *foot the bill* (pay), which consists of non-literal component (*foot*) and literal component (*bill*). If we are not familiar with a semi-literal idiom, we can guess its meaning because of the idiom constituent's meaning. The last one is the literal idiom, which is less complex than the previous two because its meaning is made up of its parts' literal meaning. For instance, *looking forward* and *taken for granted*. All these expressions belong to literal idioms because they are either completely invariant or allow only restricted variations.

Moreover, Kövecses (2001) distinguished idioms based on their meanings. He classifies it into three types: general meaning, specific meaning, and connotative meaning. By general meaning, he means the idioms with a limited range of potential general meanings, such as the word "fire," which has several conceptual meanings: fire is angry, fire is love, et cetera. Meanwhile, the specific meaning of metaphor-based idioms is the metaphors with more precise meanings that have to do with the structure of the source domain and the corresponding structure of the target domain. For example, smoke comes out of his ears, which means "more intense anger." Another meaning of idiom is connotative meaning, which refers to the meaning carried over the source domain into the elements of the target domain. Kövecses (2001, p. 101) exemplified the meaning of *spit fire*, which has connotative meaning. *Spit fire* is commonly understood as anger. But in the metaphor with a connotative meaning, it means "the anger being intense," "being out of control," and "dangerous to the angry person and others."

## 2.3 Strategies of understanding idioms

Idioms, particularly pure idioms, are challenging to understand because they have various meanings. Therefore, scholars have proposed strategies to translate idioms. Baker (2001), for instance, has proposed four strategies of idiom translation for each pure idiom: firstly, using an idiom of similar meaning and form; secondly, using an idiom of similar meaning but different form; third, translating by paraphrase; and fourthly, translating by omission. For instance, an idiom of similar meaning and its form is commonly used if both languages (the source language and target language) have similar forms and meanings of idioms. As in English idiom, there is an idiom "hand up"; in the Acehnese language, "*bet jaro*." Both use the headword "hand" (*jaro*, in the Acehnese), and their meanings are similar: surrender.

However, some other idioms have similar meanings but different forms. For example, *Do not cry for over spilled milk*, which has the same meaning as the Indonesian

idiom: *Nasi telah jadi bubur* (the rice has become porridge). This idiom needs to use a second strategy, that is, to use an idiom of similar meaning but a different form. Besides, some other idioms have different forms and meanings, such as *U bèk beukah, kuah beuleumak* in the Acehese language, which can be translated into *coconut must not be opened for use, but curry must use santan*. The meaning of the idiom is *to get money without willing to work*, which is called translation by paraphrase. The fourth strategy is translation by omission, in which the idioms in sentences are left untranslated because there is no close match in the target text.

### III. Research Method

To analyze idioms, either qualitative or quantitative or both methods have been employed by previous researchers. This study employed a qualitative method to analyze hand-related idioms through interview and corpus analysis. This study interviewed 14 old, Acehese people, aged 50 years and over from seven districts in Aceh in which the Acehese language with the same dialect is used, namely Aceh Utara, Aceh Timur, Lhokseumawe, Bireuen, Aceh Besar, Pidie, and Banda Aceh. The involvement of the old Acehese people was because they can represent the districts where the Acehese language is dominantly spoken and could provide data on the idioms in the Acehese language related to local values. The interview questions were on the idioms in the Acehese language related to the hand. The interviews were held face to face and via telephone, depending on their convenience.

Procedurally, several idioms commonly used in the Acehese language were collected before doing the interviews. Besides, the idioms were consulted with the book “Bahasa Aceh” by Sulaiman (1979). After that, the idioms were consulted with the respondents to understand the embedded Islamic values. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to ease in analyzing them.

The idioms were then classified based on Fernando’s classification in data analysis, which groups idioms into pure idioms and semi idioms, but not literal idioms. This is because the hand-related idioms in the Acehese language fall into the two classifications. These classifications help to identify the idioms commonly used in the Acehese language. We also used two of the four strategies developed by Baker (2001) in translating the idioms, including a translation by using an idiom of similar meaning and form, translation by using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form, and translation by translation by paraphrase.

### IV. Result and Discussion

#### 4.1 Findings

This study has analyzed many hand-related idioms containing educational values used in the Acehese language. It shows that, of the idioms analyzed, eleven hand-related idioms in the Acehese language fall into pure idioms and semi idioms, as can be seen in Table 1 and Table 2 below:

**Table 1.** Pure idioms in Acehese Language

| No | Idioms                       | Literal translation        | Desired meanings        | Representation      |
|----|------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 1  | <i>jaro bak langai, mata</i> | hands on the plowing tool, | thinking the supply and | link and match work |

|   |                                       |                                   |   |                     |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---------------------|
|   | <i>u pasai</i>                        | eyes to the market                | demands                                 |                     |
| 2 | <i>jaro uneun tak, jaro wie tarék</i> | right hand chops, left hand pools | work on the right path                  | self-reliance       |
| 3 | <i>Meumèt-mèt jaro, meuèek igo</i>    | hands work, teeth become dirty    | if you work, you will gain the earnings | diligence           |
| 4 | <i>bèk jaro lam kantong</i>           | Don't put hands in the pocket     | bossy; don't want to help               | personality         |
| 5 | <i>Leung paleut</i>                   | Open arms                         | To pray oneself or someone              | Submission to Allah |
| 6 | <i>bèk jaro lam lungkiek pha</i>      | Don't put hands inside the thighs | lazy; don't want to work                | personality         |

Table 1 above shows that all the idioms are related to hands (*jaro*, in the Acehnese language; *paleut*, arm/part of hand). Some of them have a literal meaning and figurative meaning. Furthermore, they idioms are explained in the following ways:

1. ***Jaro bak langai, mata u pasai***

"*Jaro bak langai, mata u pasai*" can be translated literally into "hands are put on the plowing tool, eyes to the market." This proverbial idiom means that it is necessary to do jobs as demanded in the market. In this way, people can earn money to survive by selling the products, which money can be used to support the needy.

2. ***Jaro uneun tak, jaro wie tarék***

This idiom can literally be translated into "right hand chops, left hand pools (it)." Its meaning is that it encourages people to be self-reliant, by using our hands to work in the right way (*halal*).

3. ***Bèk jaro lam kantong***

The idiom "*Jaro lam kantong*" can literally be translated into "hands in (his/her) own pocket." This is a habit of a person who is bossy in his life or does not want to give a hand for help. Usually, a person who is just watching people work puts his hands into his pocket; he does not want to help. Example: -"*Gob teungoh sibôk kereuja, ijih jaro lam kantong.*" (Many people are busy working together, but you do not want to help).

4. ***Meumèt-mèt jaro, meuèek igo***

"*Meumèt-mèt jaro, meuèek igo*" can literally be translated into "hands work, teeth yield remnants." "*Jaro*" (hand) in this idiom means to do work, so the metaphor means: "As long as you want to work, you will gain earnings." In English, it is nearly closed in meaning to: "no gain without pain."

5. ***Leung paleuet***

"*Leung paleuet*" literally means "to open arms." It can be used literally and figuratively. The figurative meaning of "*leung paleuet*" means to do prayer, like the parents who pray for their children. Example: -"*Uro malam lon leung paleuet keu gata.*" (I pray for you days and nights).

6. ***Jaro lam lungkiek pha***

*Jaro lam lungkiek pha* is an idiom that uses hand in the Acehnese language. Literally, it means: putting hands in between the two thighs. However, the idiom means: lazy to do

things or help others. Example: -“*Kajak mita keurija keudéh, bèk gadôh jaro lam lungkiek pha.*” (Look for the job, do not be lazy).

**Table 2.** Semi idioms in Acehnese Language

| No | Idioms                          | Literal translation            | Desired meanings   | Representation                          |
|----|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1  | <i>bét jaro</i>                 | raising hands up               | 1). stop doing something because of the feeling of inability or upset;<br>2). greet someone in a meeting or on the way | 1). surrender<br><br>2). respect        |
| 2  | <i>ëleumèe meujawi</i>          | left knowledge                 | bad knowledge  | Learning important knowledge and skills |
| 3  | <i>Bèk lheuh bu reuték jaro</i> | Not wagging hands after eating | not taking care the dishes after eating  | taking responsibility                   |
| 4  | <i>Beuphui jaro</i>             | light hands                    | willing to help  | helping others                          |
| 5  | <i>peumat jaro</i>              | help to hand sake              | settlement of a dispute  | harmony                                 |

1. *bet jaro*

“*Bet jaro*” means raising hands, as commonly done by students in the classroom during the teaching and learning process. It also means “give up,” “show respect,” and “admit.”

Examples:

-“*Lon bet jaro dalam hai nyo.*” (I this case, I give up (due to my inability to handle it))

-“*Lon bet jaro dalam hai nyo.*”

-“*Nyo meuteumèe ureung bak jalan di Aceh, bet jaro.*” (If you meet people on the way in Aceh, raise your (right) hand (to show respect)).

-“*Dalam hal kesetiaan, lon bet jaro keu gobnyan.*” (In terms of loyalty, I admit that he is the best)

Another use of “*bet jaro*” in the Acehnese culture is to greet someone by raising their right hand and saying “*assalamu’alaikum.*”

2. *Èleumèe meujawi*

“*Èleumèe meujawi*” is an expression that literally means *left-hand knowledge*. However, in the Acehnese culture, it means black magic or witchcraft.

Islam also suggests that we learn the right knowledge to support our lives on the earth and hereafter. Therefore, what is the right knowledge to learn is crucial in Islam.

3. *Bèk lheuh bu, reuték jaro*

“*Lheuh bu reuték jaro*” can literally be translated into “after eating, wag hand fingers.” However, in daily life, it means after eating, one does not take care of the dishes. This idiom is presented to a lazy person.

4. *Beuphui jaro*

“*Beuphui jaro*” contains a hand-related idiom that can be literally translated into English: “Be light hands,” which means that we need to help each other in this life. By helping each other, as strongly suggested in Islam, we will be united as an *ummah*.

5. *Peumat jaro*

“*Peumat jaro*” is literally translated as “to have people shake hands.” This hand-related idiom means to settle a dispute in the Acehnese society in which two parties shake hands as a sign that the dispute between them has ended. For example: “*Ureung meupaké kalheuh geupeumat jaro*” (*The quarreling persons have been reconciled*).

## 4.2 Discussion

This study has investigated the values conveyed in the Acehnese hand-related idioms. The findings showed that many hand-related idioms in the Acehnese language contain Islamic educational values, which are useful as learning resources, especially for Acehnese students. Drawing upon Fernando's (1996) classifications, the idioms containing educational values fall into pure and semi-idioms. The Acehnese language has more idioms with at least one literal and one figurative meaning. However, only local people who speak the Acehnese language understand them.

In understanding the meanings of the idioms, we dealt with many challenges because the domains used to present the same meanings use different headwords in English and Aceh cultures. For instance, “*jaro lam lungkiek pha*” in the Acehnese language means laziness, whereas the English language uses a dehumanizing metaphor (see Mussolf, 2015; Usman & Yusuf, 2020) *get off one's tail* to mean laziness (O'Dell and McCarthy 2010). Nevertheless, few idioms in the Acehnese language have similarities in meanings and forms. Among them is *angkat jempol*, which means thumbs-up, and *bet jaro*, similar in meaning and form to English: hands up.

This study has shown many educational values in the Acehnese idioms with “hand” as the headword. The educational values include encouragement to work, hardworking, responsibility, diligence, creativity, gratitude, and submission to Allah. These findings extend previous research findings (e.g., Rafiki and Wahab, 2014; Rehan et al. 2019; Sofa 2018). Hence, understanding the nexus of the Acehnese hand-related idioms and Islamic educational values can uncover important more meanings for life.

## V. Conclusion

The findings and discussion conclude that the hand-related idioms in the Acehnese language are many, both in pure idioms and semi-idioms. Moreover, many educational values are inherent in the hand-related idioms in the Acehnese, such as learning crucial knowledge, encouragement to work, hardworking, creativity, responsibility, diligence, gratitude, respect, and submission to Allah. These values need to be incorporated into learning contents and activities in Indonesia so as to make students competent in the vital values and idioms. Hence, it is crucial to understand the nexus of the Acehnese hand-related idioms and Islamic educational values through which important meanings for life are uncovered.



Nonetheless, this study is limited to the idioms related to hands. Further studies need to do on those parts to understand the whole-body parts idioms in the Acehese language to understand other values embedded.

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