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INONG BALE FORT AS A SYMBOL OF THE STRENGTH OF ACEH'S MARITIME WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to present the active involvement of women in the defense system of the Aceh Sultanate from the sixteenth to the early seventeenth century, particularly within a maritime context. The article examines the role of Acehnese women in maritime defense dynamics, analyzes the strategic function of Inong Bale Fort as part of the coastal defense system, and explains its significance as a symbol of women's strength, courage, and resilience. This research employs a qualitative approach using field observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies conducted in Gampong Lamreh, Aceh Besar Regency. The data obtained were analyzed using a descriptive-interpretative approach, employing maritime archaeology and gender theory in historiography to understand the social, military, and symbolic roles of women in the context of Acehnese history.. The findings indicate that Inong Bale Fort functioned not only as a coastal defense structure against maritime threats but also as a center for training, organization, and management of the Inong Bale women troops under the leadership of Admiral Malahayati. The existence of this fort demonstrates that Acehnese women held a strategic and significant position within the military and maritime systems of the Aceh Sultanate, while also challenging historiographical narratives that have traditionally privileged male-centered perspectives.

Keywords : Inong Bale Fortress, Women, Aceh maritime

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mempresentasikan keterlibatan aktif perempuan dalam sistem pertahanan Kesultanan Aceh pada abad ke-16 hingga awal abad ke-17, khususnya dalam konteks maritim. Artikel ini mengkaji secara mendalam peran perempuan Aceh dalam dinamika pertahanan laut, menganalisis fungsi strategis Benteng Inong Bale sebagai bagian dari sistem pertahanan pesisir, serta menjelaskan makna Benteng tersebut sebagai simbol kekuatan, keberanian, dan keperkasaan perempuan Aceh. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode observasi lapangan, wawancara mendalam, dan studi dokumentasi yang dilakukan di Gampong Lamreh, Kabupaten Aceh Besar. Data yang diperoleh dianalisis secara deskriptif-interpretatif dengan menggunakan pendekatan arkeologi maritim dan teori gender dalam historiografi untuk memahami peran sosial, militer, dan simbolik perempuan dalam konteks sejarah Aceh. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Benteng Inong Bale tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai struktur pertahanan strategis terhadap ancaman maritim, tetapi juga sebagai pusat pelatihan, pengorganisasian, dan pengelolaan pasukan perempuan Inong Bale di bawah kepemimpinan Laksamana Malahayati. Keberadaan Benteng ini menegaskan bahwa perempuan Aceh memiliki posisi yang strategis dan signifikan dalam sistem militer dan maritim Kesultanan Aceh, sekaligus menjadi bukti bahwa narasi historiografi yang dominan selama ini cenderung meminggirkan peran perempuan dalam sejarah pertahanan dan kekuasaan.

Kata kunci : *Benteng Inong Bale, Perempuan, Maritim Aceh*

INTRODUCTION

Women in Aceh have a very important role in the historical course of struggle in the region. One of the real examples of women's power in local historical aspects can be found in Aceh through the existence of Inong Bale Fort. This fort not only rose as a defensive building, but also became a sign of the strength, courage, and resilience of Acehnese women in handling colonialism. Behind the walls of the fort, Acehnese women took an active part in defending their area, showing extraordinary spirit of resistance and resilience in the midst of colonial coercion. The strength of women seen in Fort Inong Bale can not only be measured from physical strength, but also from their strategic role in protecting the region, maintaining cultural values, and taking care of the collective identity of Acehnese people. The principles of courage, unity, and sacrifice given from generation to generation make Inong Bale an important symbol in Aceh's maritime history and struggle (Suryedi, 2025).

Acehnese women in maritime history had a strategic position, especially during the Aceh Sultanate. In contrast to some other regions that tend to place women in domestic roles, in the context of Aceh, women are actively involved in various aspects of public life, including in the military and maritime defense.

In the history of Aceh, women were actively involved in various aspects of maritime life, including in the military and coastal defense. This was evident in the leadership of Admiral Malahayati who led Inong Bale's forces in facing threats from the sea. The existence of these women's troops shows that Aceh has a social and political system that provides space for women to play the role of main actors, not just supporters.

This phenomenon makes Aceh an interesting context to study, especially in the perspective of gender and maritime. One of the material evidences that represents the maritime power of Acehnese women is the Inong Bale Fort, which not only serves as a defense structure, but also as a symbol of women's involvement in maintaining the sovereignty of the coastal region. Therefore, this study focuses on the analysis of the role of women in Aceh's maritime power and the strategic significance of Fort Inong Bale in the context of its history and sustainability to the present.

Aceh was famous as one of the main maritime powers in the archipelago in the 16th to early 17th centuries. It is in this maritime historical context that the role of Acehnese women emerges that is striking and quite different compared to the traditions

in many other Southeast Asian regions, the Inong Bale Fort serves as a command and training center for the Acehnese women's troops known as Inong Bale. This fort is not only a physical defense structure, but also a symbol of women's active participation in the maritime and military strategy of the Sultanate of Aceh. Inong Bale's troops were led by Admiral Malahayati, a female figure who had an important role in the history of Aceh's maritime defense, under her direction, these women were directly involved in facing colonial threats, including battles against the Portuguese and Dutch fleets in the late 16th century. Inong Bale Fort functions as a training center, supervision of strategic sea routes, as well as logistics and defense synchronization of the coastal area of Aceh Besar.

The study of Fort Inong Bale as a maritime women's power in Aceh is significant not only to add to local history, but also to revisit the development of gender roles in defense history and maritime strategy. Using a gender-maritime perspective, the gender-maritime approach in this study refers to the analysis of gender roles and relations in the context of maritime activities, such as shipping, trade, and defense of Aceh's coastal areas.This study seeks to show how Acehnese women use local maritime space and structures as a means of maintaining territorial sovereignty. In addition, this study also confirms that the role of women in military and maritime history is not an exception, but an integral part of the historical dynamics of Aceh itself (Wiryono et al., 2025).

A previous study of Inong Bale Fort (Masrizal et al., 2020) In her journal "The Work of the Aceh Women's Movement in the Era of Democratic Transition", this paper focuses on examining the ideology, role, motivation and line two of the Acehnese Women's Movement, Inong Bale is the women's wing of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) they are active in the conflict era, the base is the majority of widowed women, grassroots women as well as activities and students. (Nurliza et al., 2024) "Analysis of the Squatter of the Novel of Admiral Malahayati the Woman of the End of Moerdopo". In this discussion, we analyze the background elements in the novel Admiral, in this novel how the atmosphere of the battle of Heru Bay, depicts in symbolic and emotional detail. There are also several historical places, namely ma'had Baitul Maqdis is a place where the academy of religious figures is educated, the palace of the Aceh sultanate as the center of power and decision-making, Inong Bale Fort in Krueng Raya is a strategic military place and a base for women's troops (Inong Bale), pier towers, shipyards, private cabins, to haru bay, which is a place that strengthens the atmosphere of struggle, farewell, and

Kingdom life. In this novel, it also depicts the cultural and spiritual atmosphere. (Chamidah & Wifaqi, 2025) This study takes Malahayati's leadership in the naval war, reveals the influence of Malahayati's change on gender change, as well as ideas for women's empowerment to the present day.

As a center for maritime command, training, and surveillance, Fort Inong Bale shows that Acehnese women do not simply play a role in the domestic space, but are directly involved in military structures and naval warfare strategies. This role reflects the unique gender dynamics in Aceh's history, where women were given the space and legitimacy to lead, fight, and contribute to maintaining political stability and regional defense. This makes Inong Bale Fort an important site for understanding the relationship between gender, power, and maritime strategy in the local context of Aceh.

This research aims to examine Fort Inong Bale as a symbol of the strength of Aceh's maritime women, by examining the function of the Fort, the role of Inong Bale's troops, and the leadership of Admiral Malahayati in the context of the history of maritime defense. Through a gender-maritime approach, this study seeks to affirm that women's contributions to Aceh's military and maritime history are not the exception, but an integral part of the historical dynamics and collective identity of the Acehnese people.

Previous studies have shown that the Inong Bale Fort has been discussed both in the context of the modern women's movement, literary representation, and Malahayati leadership. However, there is still limited research that specifically links the function of this fort to the construction of gender roles in Aceh's maritime defense strategy. Therefore, this research is expected to enrich the historiographical treasures of Aceh, as well as provide a new perspective on the role of women in the defense and maritime history of the archipelago.

RESEARCH METHODS

In general, research methods can be recognized as systematic ways used to obtain data with specific purposes and functions. The research method is the main structure of the researcher in understanding the focus of the study in a structured and designed manner. Therefore, research methods need to be distinguished from data collection techniques, which are the stages of engineering and more specifically in the process of obtaining data in the field. In this study, the author uses a qualitative type of research. The qualitative

approach was chosen in this study because the focus of the study does not aim to measure the phenomenon numerically, but to understand in depth the meaning, role, and social experience related to the existence of Inong Bale Fort and the involvement of Acehnese women in the maritime defense system of the Sultanate of Aceh. According to (Syahrizal & Jailani, 2023), qualitative research is used to examine social and cultural phenomena holistically by emphasizing the processes, meanings, and contexts that surround the object of research. Therefore, the qualitative approach is considered the most relevant because it allows researchers to interpret historical, symbolic, and narrative data sourced from community experiences, historical documents, and cultural practices that are still ongoing today. The concepts used in this study are natural observation and phenomenology. Natural observation is carried out by directly looking at the field conditions of the intervention, so that the data obtained describes the conditions and activities that take place as they are. Meanwhile, a phenomenological approach was applied to reveal the experiences, perspectives, and meanings experienced by the research subjects related to the existence and function of Inong Bale Fort as a symbol of the strength of Acehnese women (Ramadhan, 2021).

The determination of informants in this study uses the purposive sampling technique, which is the deliberate selection of informants based on certain considerations relevant to the purpose of the research. The number of informants interviewed in this study was 10 people. This technique was chosen because not all members of the community have in-depth knowledge and experience related to the history and symbolic significance of Inong Bale Fort. In line with (Ramadani et al., 2025)purposive sampling allows researchers to obtain rich and in-depth data from informants that have a direct connection to the preservation of local history and cultural identity. The criteria for informants in this study include: (1) adulthood, especially individuals who have lived in Gampong Lamreh for a long time; (2) have knowledge of local history, especially related to Fort Inong Bale and the role of Acehnese women in maritime defense; and (3) actively involved in cultural practices, preservation of historical sites, or customary activities related to the historical and symbolic values of the Fort. The determination of this criterion aims to ensure that the data obtained is relevant, in-depth, and in accordance with the focus of the research study.

In this study, the data collection taken by the author was using three methods, namely, interviews, observations, and documentation. interviews are conducted in a structured manner, namely the researcher prepares a list of questions as a direction to get more information, observation is carried out by looking directly at the activities of residents who maintain stories, symbols, and cultural practices related to Inong Bale Fort, documentation is used to add field data through searching for documents and written sources. Data was produced from historical archives, scientific articles, books, and various other writings that correspond to the figure of Inong Bale Fort and the description of Acehnese women in the story of struggle. (Scott, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History of Women in Maritime Aceh

The role of women in the maritime setting can be seen through the various important tasks they carry out in the lives of coastal communities. This participation is not only limited to the domestic sector. But it spread to trade activities, religious ritual practices, and the management of marine resources. However, the important role of women in the maritime world is still rarely officially documented in historical records. Thus, the role of women is often overlooked in the big story of Indonesia's maritime history which prioritizes male figures and activities. One of the main consequences that causes this condition is the strong patriarchal culture in the archipelago's maritime society, which chooses to place the role of women as fillers or even ignored. (Adzkiyak, 2025). In Aceh's maritime history, women have had a strategic role that is not only limited to the domestic sphere, but also includes leadership and direct involvement in the maritime defense system, as reflected in the figure of Admiral Malahayati (Aziz, 2024). However, the important role of women is often marginalized in Indonesia's maritime historiography, which is still dominated by patriarchal perspectives, so women's contributions often do not receive adequate recognition in the official historical narrative.

The history of Aceh has a long trace of women's involvement in the field of leadership and resistance. Long before the emergence of the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam, women had played an important role in the political power structure in this region. Entering the Aeh Darussalam Kingdom, the role of women did not only end in the scope of government, but increased more broadly to the military field. Women were given

a significant place in the Kingdom's defense structure, one of which was through the formation of the Inong Bale Fortress troops during the reign of Sultan Alaudin Shah (1589-1604). This army was formed from widows whose husbands died on the battlefield, Inong Bale Fort, the existence of the Inong Bale army led by Admiral Malahayati is a clear indication that Acehnese women are not only placed as hidden supporters, but are known as the main figures in maintaining the power and power of the Kingdom. Through this role, Acehnese women display the form of fighters who are tough, courageous, and have a strategic position in Aceh's military and maritime history (Wahyuningroem, 2005).

Malahayati is one of the most influential female warriors in the history of the Aceh sultanate. He has the real name Keumalahayati and was born into a military noble family that is related to Aceh's maritime traditions. His father, Admiral Mahmud Shah, was known as the commander of the navy, while his paternal grandfather, Admiral Muhammad Said Shah, was the son of Sultan Salahuddin Shah who ruled Aceh around 1530-1539 AD. Sultan Salahuddin Shah himself was the son of Sultan Ibrahim Ali Mughayat Shah (1513-1530 AD), the founder of the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam. It is this background that shaped Malahayati growing up in a tradition of leadership, military, and Tough happiness from an early age.

Since the beginning, the umallahati has obtained religious education in meunasah and dayah. As the son of a naval commander, he had ample freedom to determine his educational path and future. Armed with the Maritime blood that flows within him, Malahayati aspires to follow in his father's footsteps as a sailor and sea warrior. This desire was then carried out by continuing military education at Ma'had Baitul Maqdis, a military academy of the Aceh sultanate that majored in the Army and Navy, and was supported by instructors from the Ottoman Turks during the reign of Sultan Selim II.

In this institution, Malahayati is known to be intelligent and disciplined. After graduating, she served as the commander of the Darud-Dunia palace protkcol, while her husband became an admiral. The death of her husband in a battle against the Portuguese in the Strait of Malacca was a turning point that inspired Malahayati to step down directly in the military leadership. With the approval of Sultan Saidil Mukammil Alaudin Syah IV, Malahayati formed and directed the Inong Bale Fleet, a women's army consisting of Acehnese widows. The fleet was reinforced by more than a hundred warships and thousands of soldiers, making it an important force in the waters of the Straits of Malacca.

Under the leadership of Malahayati, Inong Bale's troops were involved in various battles against the Dutch. In 1599, Malahayati managed to kill Cornelis de Houtman in battle, as well as capture Frederick de Houtman. This series of resistance forced the Dutch to change its strategy from military confrontation to a path of diplomacy with the Sultanate of Aceh. This story confirms Malahayati's position as a symbol of Aceh's prempuan power in maritime history and territorial defense (Halimah, 2024).

Inong Bale Fort as a Maritime Power of Aceh Women

A. Overview of Inong Bale Fortress

Malahayati in educating women, she took a special place called the Inong Bale Fort complex in Lamreh, She taught everything related to the tasks that would be carried out by women warriors, the Fort was a witness to how Malahayati trained women to get technical skills, get physical abilities so that they could successfully carry out their duties, so the Fort was special because it was a training place, and also a place where Malahayati pondered what strategies could be done in driving out the enemies of the kingdom of that time. (Interview Results, 2025). Fort Inong Bale not only serves as a coastal defense structure, but also represents the maritime power of Acehnese women who have legitimacy in the military and political system of the Sultanate of Aceh. The existence of Inong Bale's troops shows that Acehnese women play an active role as subjects of struggle in maintaining the sovereignty of the sea and negotiating the space of power in the midst of a patriarchal social structure. From the perspective of women's struggle, Chairun Nisah emphasized that women's involvement in the political and defense realms is part of efforts to seek justice and recognition of women's strategic role in Aceh's history (Muzaffarsyah et al., 2025). Thus, Inong Bale Fort can be understood not only as a symbol of maritime power, but also as a historical representation of the struggle of Acehnese women in obtaining an equal and recognized position in the historical narrative.



Figure 1. Condition of the back of Inong Bale Fort

This image shows the back of the Fort facing the coast with the condition of the structure still remaining.

So far the general condition and character of Inong Bale Fort has been observed leaving only a small part of its original structure. The part that is still visible on the surface is the wall on the north side that extends just above the cliff. In fact, based on the indications of the structure and distribution of materials, this fort in the past had a fairly large area. Many parts of the Fort are no longer visible because they are buried in the ground, have collapsed due to material fragility, or have been damaged by natural factors for hundreds of years. Although visually the remains seem very limited, in fact there are still many structures and archaeological remains stored in the ground. The potential of such archaeological data is enormous and can only be revealed through exploration and more in-depth and systematic archaeological research. Unfortunately, until now studies and excavations carried out by archaeologists and historians are still very limited. This condition causes our understanding of Fort Inong Balee—both in terms of form, function, and role in Aceh's maritime defense system—to be completely inadequate. Therefore, the physical existence of Inong Balee Fort is very important to be protected and preserved. The site holds the potential for historical and archaeological knowledge that has not been optimally excavated. Through more serious protection and exploration efforts, this Fort can become a valuable source of knowledge, not only for the development of historical and archaeological studies, but also as an educational heritage that can be used in the world of education in the present and future. (Observation results, October 16, 2025).



Figure 2. Condition of the side of Inong Bale Fort

This image shows the side of Inong Bale Fort with the wall structure still standing despite damage at some point

The shape and location of the Inong Bale Fort indicate a special function in Aceh's maritime defense. Geographically, this fort is strategically located because it is located in the shipping lane of the Strait of Malacca, one of the most important sea lanes of its time. Its position at a high level on the coast gives it a distinctive character as a marine traffic monitoring fortress. From this point, the movement of passing ships can be observed quite clearly, so that the presence of foreign or enemy ships can be detected early. In front of the fort there is a lush vegetation that naturally functions as camouflage as well as protection. However, this condition does not obstruct the visibility, because from the location of the Fort there is a wide view towards the waters, even to the Sabang area. Although not the entire stretch of the Strait of Malacca can be monitored thoroughly, at least ships that want to approach and anchor on the coast of Aceh can be seen from the position of the Fort. This shows that Inong Balee Fort has an important role as an initial surveillance point in the marine defense system. The strategic advantage of Inong Balee Fort is further strengthened by the combination of elevation, the weakness of the beach, and its orientation towards the main shipping route. The altitude advantage allows for more extensive and effective observations, while proximity to the sea facilitates the coordination of maritime defenses. Thus, this fort not only serves as a passive defense structure, but also as a strategic monitoring center that supports the maritime power of the Sultanate of Aceh.



Figure 3. Location of Inong Bale Fortress
This image shows the location of the fort in a strategic coastal area

The Fort Wall was not solely built as a physical barrier against the enemy, but rather functioned as a space barrier for those within the Fort area. The existence of the wall marks the existence of an organized fortification space, in which there are settlement spaces, daily activity spaces, and other spaces that support the life and military readiness of soldiers. The physical condition that is still visible today is mostly a wall that shows military functions, especially through the existence of cannon filling holes. These holes show that the fort served as a point of surveillance and control of sea traffic. Cannons placed behind walls were not always used for open combat, but rather as a means of bluffing and warning. If passing foreign ships do not heed directions or warnings, cannon fire can be fired towards the sea as a warning sign not to approach or violate Aceh's territory. Although it is possible that at a certain time this fort was once the location of battles, during the leadership of Admiral Malahayati the area of Inong Balee Fort was relatively safe from large-scale conflicts. In that period, the function of the fort was more used as a military training center for Inong Balee's troops. Thus, this fort not only represents defense strength, but also reflects an organized military system oriented towards preparedness, discipline, and strengthening the capacity of women soldiers in maintaining the maritime sovereignty of the Kingdom of Aceh. (Zulfirhri's interview, November 14, 2025).

Inong Bale Fort compared to other forts that make this fort special is its character and activities in it because in history there are no men, all women or widows whose husbands died in the war against the Portuguese, these widows then who did have good quality, intelligent and strong, were selected by Malahayati to be trained in that place,

This activity is what makes this special, it is rare for the fortress to be used as an educational location even by women, whose duties concurrently serve many positions apart from being military trainers, she also teaches about technology, which is special again she was educated by the Ottoman Turkish troops, so she got that military and naval knowledge from her Turkish teachers who happened to be meeting them at that time, Malahayati was the first generation to be taught about the sciences of chemistry so that his character was very strong, the principle of training was exactly with the European procedure of practicing in a special place, not in the village but in that location, Malahayati started with that technique but was taught by the Ottoman Turks, that is what makes Fort Inong Bale special not only as defense but as education.

B. The role of women in the Maritime Defense Structure

The role of Inong Bale in the fort defense system, historically exists with the story of Inong Bale the collective memory of the community before the present is written in several Dutch reports about the existence of a woman having an important role in the Aceh kingdom, this shows that that is what makes her very important to be excavated. An important message that can be learned from Fort Inong Bale for the current generation, this malahayati is recognized by the world as one of the female figures, the world recognizes her role Because she inspired in the period of the mid to late 1500s of the world Erpoa women are seen very low as enslaved, made the object of many things that are burk about women there, but in Aceh the role is inversely proportional to the western world which is now more modern, Our thinking is more advanced and farther away and gives equal roles between men and women and it is respected throughout the world and countries, so giving recognition of Malahayati's contribution opens up the insight of the parallels between men and women, the way of educating women to be tough, strong, so that it becomes a special thing for Fort Inong Bale. If in the past there was an important role taken by women in addition to the duty as wives, also as educators, even when their husbands died they took over as a male role and made a living, if in the past the sultan gave awards, gave strength because the sultan believed in Malahayati that there was potential as a warlord in the marine sector, managing thousands of ships, tens of thousands of soldiers, organizing sophisticated weapons at that time to developing a war strategy to defeat the enemies of the kingdom, Malahayati only thought about how his

area, namely Aceh, he only thought about how the next generation would not experience colonialism (Results of Ambo's interview, November 7, 2025).

This fortress does not only belong to Aceh but belongs to the whole world because the world has recognized it, but unfortunately the world also does not pay attention to the legacy of Admiral Malahayati resulting in the relics that are more than 400 years old and continue to experience a reduction in strength every day, the older, the less adhesion it is so that it will collapse for a long time if there is no handling of the collapse, when it collapses it is only in the rubble, When he became a debris for a long time buried by the ground, 50 years later came a new ground covered and disappeared. It is hoped that the whole world will be responsible for maintaining the fortress. The way we appreciate is to preserve what still exists. Unfortunately, there is no commemoration day about Admiral Malahayati. The world owes a lot to the fortress. Malahayati with a strength of 2,000 troops has far surpassed modern thoughts, that's what we must encourage, there should be a female minister in Aceh, now there is a lot of criticism if women become leaders. Before Malahayati chose the location as his training place and built the Inong Bale Fort, there used to be a village there and maybe it was empty, then Malahayati chose the location, a way for him to be safe, he built a spatial layout, on the walls that were bounded. (Maksum interview results, November 7, 2025).

Initially, the Dutch promised to borrow ships to help Aceh conquer Johor. However, when the Acehnese troops were about to board the ship, the Dutch's intention turned into a ruse. A fierce clash ensued. In that incident, many Dutch people were killed and the two captains of the ship were finally captured by Acehnese troops led directly by Malahayati. This success then confirmed his position as Admiral of the Sultanate of Aceh. The Inong Balee fleet was repeatedly involved in battles in the Strait of Malacca, the east coast of Sumatra, and the Malay region. In fact, a Dutch female writer, Marie van Zuchyelen, said that this army consisted of about 2,000 trained and brave female soldiers. Apart from being a warlord, Malahayati also played an important role in international relations. He was trusted by the Sultan to receive the envoy of Queen Elizabeth I of England, Sir James Lancaster, who came to Aceh in 1602 with an official letter from the British kingdom. This shows that Malahayati is not only a military leader, but also a respected diplomatic figure.

After the death of Sultan Alaiddin Ali Riayat Shah IV, the tradition of women's involvement in the military continued. During the time of Sultan Muda Ali Riayat Syah V Mukammil, the Palace Guard Union was formed which also involved female soldiers. In fact, two female figures, Admiral Red Ganti and Cut Red Inseun, were recorded as having contributed to the release of Iskandar Muda. When Iskandar Muda ascended the throne, attention to the female army was even greater. She formed a more organized and modern women's palace guard unit, even led by a female general, Keumala Cahaya. Part of this army also served as an honorary unit in welcoming royal guests. All of this shows that in Aceh's history, women were not only present as supporters, but as main actors in the military, politics, and diplomacy, and Malahayati was the most powerful symbol of that tradition. Architecturally, the fort has a rectangular plan and faces west, directly to the Strait of Malacca, which shows its function as a naval defense fortress. In terms of the environment, the western part is bordered by a ravine, while the other side is in the form of sloping land. The structure of the fort consists of three main walls—north, south, and west—with the east side left open facing the hill.

The Krueng Raya Bay area around the fort is also rich in archaeological data, such as Chinese ceramic finds from the 13th to early 16th centuries, which show that the region has long been an important part of international shipping and trade networks. (Results of Masnauli's interview, November 7, 2025).

Fort Inong Bale is concrete evidence of the involvement of Acehnese women in maritime power since the Sultanate of Aceh, especially under the leadership of Admiral Keumalahayati. This fort was not only built as an ordinary defense building, but also served as a command and training center for the women's army known as Inong Balee, which was the widows of soldiers who were militarily trained to defend the Aceh sea area from colonial attacks, especially the Portuguese. In their study, it was emphasized that Inong Balee not only played a role as a logistical supporter, but was also directly involved in naval battles, securing trade routes, and drafting maritime war strategies. Fort Inong Bale is a symbol as well as physical proof that Acehnese women have a strategic position in the kingdom's naval defense structure, because it is from this fort that maritime operations are designed and carried out. Thus, the existence of the fort shows that Acehnese women not only play a role in the domestic realm, but also appear as the main actors in the maritime strength and defense of the coastal region of Aceh.

The history of Inong Balee confirms that Inong Bale Fort is historical evidence of the maritime power of Acehnese women because the fort was built specifically as a naval defense base and a center of activity for women's troops operating in the coastal area. In this article, it is explained that the fort was used to store weapons, organize naval battle strategies, and supervise shipping and trade routes which became the lifeblood of Aceh's economic and political power. The location of the fort near the sea shows a defensive orientation that is maritime, not purely land. In addition, the Inong Balee troops who were based in this fort were trained in naval warfare tactics and were given the responsibility of maintaining sovereignty over Aceh's territorial waters. This shows that Acehnese women are not only a symbolic part of history, but actually become the main actors in the maritime defense system. Therefore, Inong Bale Fort can be understood as tangible evidence that Acehnese women have strength, independence, and a strategic role in maintaining Aceh's maritime sovereignty (Ulfah et al.,)

Maritime Power of Aceh Women and Its Relation to Today

The maritime power of Acehnese women has been formed since the time of the Aceh Sultanate, when women were not only present as supporters in social life, but also appeared as main actors in the maritime defense and power system. This is clearly reflected in the leadership of Admiral Malahayati, who became a symbol of the courage and ability of Acehnese women in managing the naval defense strategy and leading Inong Bale's troops. The existence of Malahayati shows that Acehnese women have a strategic position in the maritime structure of the Aceh Sultanate and play an active role in maintaining the sovereignty of the Aceh maritime area from external threats (Aziz, 2024).

The values of leadership, resilience, and independence inherited through history continue to this day in various forms of Acehnese women's roles in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam. In the modern context, Acehnese women are actively involved in the social, economic, and cultural spheres, as well as contributing to the process of social change in the midst of post-conflict social dynamics and the implementation of Islamic law. This role marks the continuity between the historical strength of Acehnese women and contemporary reality, where women are no longer positioned as fringe actors, but as an important part of the development and transformation of Acehnese society (Munira et al., 2018).

Nowadays, the maritime strength of Acehnese women is reflected in their direct involvement in sea-based activities, such as managing the fishermen's family's economy, distributing and marketing their catches, and processing seafood into value-added products. Acehnese coastal women play a role in managing the finances of their catches, selling fish at fish auctions, and processing seafood into products such as salted fish and fish crackers. In addition, women also have important local knowledge, such as understanding the sea season, reading weather signs, and maintaining coastal traditions such as the peusijuk ritual before going to sea. In modern developments, this role has undergone a transformation through the use of technology, where coastal women began to use social media to market marine products and form business groups or women's fishing cooperatives. This shows that the maritime power of Acehnese women not only survives, but also adapts to the changing times without losing its connection with the sea as the main space of coastal community life. (Yunus et al., 2024).

The maritime power of Acehnese women has been formed since the time of the Sultanate of Aceh, when women not only played a role in social life, but also appeared as the main actors in the defense system and maritime power. Admiral Malahayati's leadership is proof that Acehnese women have strategic abilities in managing naval defenses and leading Inong Bale's forces, thus placing women in an important position in the maritime structure of the Sultanate of Aceh (Aziz, 2024). This historical role shows that the maritime power of Acehnese women is deeply rooted in the traditions and historical experiences of the Acehnese people (Yunus et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, Acehnese women have a significant role in Aceh's maritime history, which includes aspects of leadership, defense, and management of maritime power. Since the time of the Sultanate of Aceh, women have been actively involved in the military and maritime defense systems, as reflected in the leadership of Admiral Malahayati and the existence of Inong Bale's troops. In addition, Inong Bale Fort is a material and symbolic proof of the maritime power of Acehnese women, which serves as a center for defense, military training, and the organization of women's forces in maintaining the sovereignty of coastal areas.

These findings show that Aceh's maritime historiography needs to be revisited by including a gender perspective, as it has tended to be dominated by patriarchal narratives. Recognition of women's roles in maritime history is not only important for straightening out the historical construction, but also reinforcing the understanding of women's contributions as strategic actors in social and political systems. In addition, the continuity of the role of Acehnese women to the present day in sea-based activities—such as catch management, fishery product processing, and preservation of coastal local knowledge—shows that women's maritime power is dynamic and adaptive to changing times.

This study recommends the need for a more in-depth follow-up study of the role of women in the maritime context, particularly through an interdisciplinary approach that combines history, gender, and maritime studies. In addition, efforts are needed to preserve historical sites such as Inong Bale Fort as cultural heritage that represents the role of women in Aceh's history. The government and the community are also expected to support the empowerment of coastal women through strengthening the capacity of seafood-based economies, the use of digital technology for marketing, and institutional development such as women's fishermen's cooperatives to improve the welfare of coastal communities in a sustainable manner.

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