GERRY VAN KLINKEN

M. Isa Sulaiman (1951-2004)

Isa Sulaiman was one of Aceh's most important social scientists. Unlike other talented Acehnese, he did not move to Jakarta, nor did he go into politics or the bureaucracy. He stuck to his scholarship as if it was a calling. Three days after returning from the workshop that produced this book, on the morning of 26 December 2004, he was among the multitude of human beings swept away by the tsunami. His extensive archives also disappeared in the water.

Isa Sulaiman was born on 28 June 1951 in Manggeng, Labuhan Haji, a small town in South Aceh. It lay near Meulaboh that was to be destroyed by the tsunami; the area was hurt by fighting in the 1990s. In 1977 he graduated from the History Department of the Faculty of Education at the Syiah Kuala University, in the provincial capital Banda Aceh. His thesis, on religion in his home town after independence, marked the beginning of two abiding interests – things that happen in small places, and how religion gets on in modernizing times. The Australian historian Lance Castles was one of his mentors. Impressed, the university offered him a lectureship.

Academic work at a state university in an authoritarian system can be deadening. The 1980s were the height of the militaristic New Order. Some of Isa's early work was little more than anthropological list-making. In order somehow to shape a national culture, the government asked social scientists around the country to make exhaustive 'inventories' of traditional rituals such as weddings.¹ The ruling idea was that cultures are static things that need only be classified to be understood.

In 1979 he was invited to Makassar (then Ujung Pandang), in South Sulawesi. The innovative Pusat Latihan Penelitian Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial (PLPIIS, Centre for Social Sciences Research Training) was one of four sponsored by the Ford Foundation. Another stood in Banda Aceh. He wrote a fine field study on a Buginese ironworking village (Isa Sulaiman 1979). His supervisor, the Bugis specialist Christian Pelras, then arranged for him to write a doctoral dissertation in Paris. This was Isa's big break. Separated from wife and two

¹ Isa Sulaiman 1978; Syamsuddin, Hasan Husin and Isa Sulaiman 1981; Hasan Husin, Isa Sulaiman Mahmud Main et al. 1982.

young sons, he learned French and wrote a 365-page dissertation in that language within the required three years (Isa Sulaiman 1985a). Denys Lombard was his supervisor. This solid study on the struggle for Aceh between aristocrats and religious leaders in the years of occupation and revolution 1942-1951 remains unpublished, though he wrote several articles based on it (Isa Sulaiman 1985b, 1985c).

The same thorough approach informed his next book-length work, which also did not circulate widely because it was self-published. It was a transcription with a long introduction of four epic poems (*hikayat*) about the Cumbok War, the decisive battle between the aristocracy and radical nationalists in Pidie in December 1945-January 1946 (Isa Sulaiman 1990b).

In 1997 his *Sejarah Aceh* (History of Aceh) appeared with a major Jakarta publisher. It covered the tumultuous period 1942-1962 and thus incorporated and extended his dissertation work. This was his debut for a wider public. A foreword by the redoubtable T.H. Ibrahim Alfian placed him among only nine Acehnese with substantial work on Aceh's politics and history, though only Isa and Ibrahim Alfian were historians.² *Sejarah Aceh* is carefully crafted. He trawled archives in the Netherlands and Jakarta for it, persuaded key Acehnese actors to talk, and tracked down rare documents in private and public collections in Aceh. This bloody period covers the end of Dutch rule, the Japanese occupation, the independence struggle including the social revolution of early 1946, and the Darul Islam revolt of the 1950s.

Far more than a chronology, he also brought his own interpretation to this period. Till then the dominant Indonesian explanation of the Darul Islam revolt came from Nazaruddin Syamsuddin (Isa Sulaiman 1985, 1990), who portrayed it as persistent Acehnese primordialism obstructing national integration. Isa preferred to read the entire period as a struggle within Aceh itself, a fruitful struggle for an emerging modernity. He had been working on this theme for some time (Isa Sulaiman 1988a, 1988b). Like Nazaruddin he was a modern intellectual who only occasionally showed a touch of nostalgia for the 'harmony' of traditional village life (Isa Sulaiman 1990a). If we read between the lines we can perhaps even detect some regret at his own role, Snouck Hurgronje-like,³ of lending his intellect to aid the destructive penetration by the modern bureaucratic state into this rural idyll (Isa Sulaiman 1988c; Isa Sulaiman, Hasan Husin et al. 1995). Yet more than Nazaruddin, Isa wrote about Aceh from within, and he refused to despair. The radicals who took

² The others were Ali Hasjmy, Nazaruddin Syamsuddin, Hasan Saleh, Amran Zamzami, Sjamaun Gaharu and Fachry Ali, to which we must add Ibrahim Alfian himself.

³ Snouck Hurgronje was the late nineteenth century colonial anthropologist and official who advised the Dutch army in Aceh. Indonesian nationalists naturally regard him as a villain. However, Isa portrayed him more positively as a careful observer, who moreover trained Acehnese researchers (Isa Sulaiman 2004).

on the aristocrats in 1946, and who went on to challenge Jakarta in the 1950s, were self-made individuals arising from the common people. They educated themselves in private religious schools in the 1930s because the Dutch and the Acehnese aristocrats had conspired to block their rise. The fact that they themselves later adopted the same patrimonial leadership style as those they had opposed merely led to new revolts from their own ranks. Thus in Isa's view, the characteristic Acehnese heroism may have caused blood to run, but it was certainly not atavistic.⁴

Heroism was not something just to write about, but to do. When Reformasi came also to Aceh, Isa did not sit on the fence. He introduced his book on the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM, Free Aceh Movement) (Isa Sulaiman 2000) by saying he hoped it would add a historical dimension to a strident indictment of military human rights abuse written earlier by Al-Chaidar (1998). Once again it was well-documented, and it displayed a fearlessness and compassion that few could match. It refused to bow to ideology – whether nationalist Indonesian, Acehnese, or religious. Accuracy and balance were everything. It was written at a moment when both the Indonesian armed forces and GAM carried out assassinations against civilian activists and academics who displeased them.

The book led to an invitation to join the 'Acehnese civil society task force' in Banda Aceh, which hoped to create a democratic space amid the fighting. In November 2002 the international mediation group Henry Dunant Centre (HDC) invited him and others to Geneva to shore up negotiations between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian government. It was his first meeting with Acehnese leaders in exile, and he was impressed with them.

Just when the tsunami claimed him, Isa seemed to be going from strength to strength. His chapter for the present book was not quite finished. It was another well-documented indictment of the political order (Isa Sulaiman and Van Klinken 2007). He knew the whole cast personally, but refused to let his need for acceptance overwhelm his judgment of them. In May 2004 he co-convened a conference at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore on the historical background of the Aceh problem. He had just done fieldwork in the remote Simeulue Island off Sumatra's west coast. He planned to write about the left, which disappeared from Aceh and from the history books in 1965 (he admired the socialist youth movement Pesindo). He wanted to write about Indonesian literature and social change in Aceh between 1927 and 1962. And he taught large classes in Banda Aceh.

During his four and a half months at the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-,

⁴ Although he was only one of the ghost-writers, the biography of Abdul Muluk, Aceh's best-known engineer who was also born in South Aceh, illustrates the same confidence that modernity and Aceh do go together (Isa Sulaiman 2001).

Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies) in Leiden in 2003, Isa was usually quiet in company. But when the ice was broken he could laugh, loudly. When he spoke about Aceh there was fire in his voice. That fire also lit up his scholarship. Aceh deserves no less.

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