
When the Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia launched the Indonesian translation of Anton Stolwijk’s Dutch monograph on March 11, 2022, hundreds of Acehnese youths joined the online book talk enthusiastically. Its contents were not really surprising to me personally, since memories, stories, and ghosts of the Dutch war in Aceh (1873–1942) have been told and shared among the Acehnese for generations. Yet, since not many written sources are available to back up these oral traditions they continue to live with, I was left with a sense that *Aceh* is a book many modern Acehnese cannot afford to miss.

Broadly speaking, the Dutch war in Aceh was the longest, bloodiest, and costliest in the Dutch colonial history. In his introduction, however, Stolwijk indicates that this war is absent from the contemporary Dutch collective memory. Many young people in the Netherlands have no clue what the war was really about. It is only a part of dusty colonial archives, which have not received adequate attention (p. xiv).

When Anton Stolwijk visited Aceh in 2009 and met with many Acehnese people, he was amazed that colonial history is not merely a thing of the past for them. A few years prior, Aceh was torn apart by a bloody conflict with its central government. Then a massive tsunami hit the region, killing at least a quarter million of its population. While Acehnese people were facing the utmost challenges brought about by these disasters, the legacies of colonialism remained very much alive in their memory. Stolwijk paid several other visits to Aceh between 2009 to 2015 to collect firsthand materials for this wonderful book.

Beautifully translated by Susi Moeimam and Nurhayu Santoso, *Aceh* successfully showcases that Anton Stolwijk is indeed a gifted writer and an excellent storyteller. Each chapter begins with a captivating introduction about present-day Aceh. Then, he walks us, sometimes unexpectedly, through archival materials that connect to many important landscapes, monuments, and moments of the colonial war in Aceh. This makes the book partly a history of the present and partly an ethnography of the past.

Every war has its unique stories. Chronologically, these stories are written in 26 chapters and arranged around themes familiar to those studying Aceh-Dutch colonial history. Such themes include a brief history of the Aceh sultanate and its golden time, the Sumatra treaty, the first and the second Dutch invasion to Kutaradja (now Banda Aceh), the Nisero shipwreck, the Holy War, the Aceh killings (*Atjeh-moorden*), and many more war episodes until the arrival
of the Japanese army in Aceh in 1942. Anton successfully and lively depicts the anthropological sides of the wartime, including wins, defeats, losses, love, betrayals, desertions, hopes, and ghosts. He does so by selectively quoting military archives, journals, diary entries, journalistic reports, photos, and other artifacts.

True to his reputation as a magnificent storyteller, Anton Stolwijk inserts humorous descriptions of the frustration of the warring sides and ridiculous stories surrounding some figures remembered only as warlords and warmongers. Thus, stories of Habib Abdurrahman, Van Heutz, Snouck Hurgronje, Van Daalen, Teuku Umar, or Cut Nyak Dhien are presented through rather different angles than those that have been told and retold within Acehnese communities. In fact, some Acehnese readers might find the angles of these stories and archival reports disappointing.

Treacheries and betrayals are common during times of war. They could be triggered by trivial matters such as boredom, routines, the feeling of being trapped within the fortress, as well as curiosity about the enemy. Teuku Umar is a hero for Acehnese people in particular and for Indonesians in general, but he was surely a traitor in the eyes of the Dutch colonial government. Many contemporary Acehnese might not anticipate that what Teuku Umar did was also done by several Dutch officers. There is a chapter entitled “Mualaf” (p. 91) that talks about a Dutch soldier named Frans Pauwels who deserted, converted to Islam, and fought alongside the Acehnese guerilla fighters.

Last but not least, it should be stressed that the book makes no scholarly claims nor intends to be an authoritative text about the Aceh War. However, Aceh will certainly add a strong voice to a recent debate in the Netherlands on ways for Dutch people to deal with their colonial past.

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