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. 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

---

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struggle for Aceh between aristocrats and religious leaders in the years of occupation and revolution 1942-1951 remains unpublished, though he wrote several articles based on it (Isa Sulaiman 1985b, 1985c).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. 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, 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).