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Andrew Goss

University of New Orleans, agoss@uno.edu

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**Mobile Warriors and Cosmopolitan Intellectuals:
The Legacy of the Dutch Counterinsurgency in Colonial Aceh**

Andrew Goss
USA

For the last two generations, historians have understood the long war between the Dutch and the Acehnese in the context of accelerating Dutch imperialism in the archipelago.¹ When the Dutch contemplated attacking Aceh in 1873, their goal was to expand Dutch territory and power, and this ambition was sufficient to justify violent conquest. For the next twenty-eight years, up until Acehnese resistance was destroyed in 1901, the Dutch fought to establish a colonial government in Acehnese territory. While the unsuccessful policies to achieve these ends were frequently criticized, especially after the Acehnese continued to resist Dutch advances, the wider purpose of expanding territory and people under Dutch power was not. The Dutch believed that a successful conquest would lead smoothly to a military occupation that made way for a beneficent civil government. Even when Acehnese resistance continued unabated, this basic idea died hard. For this reason, the Dutch were reluctant counter-insurgents, not believing it was necessary. Eventually the Dutch colonial government came to see that they did not understand their opponent's guerrilla mentality, and they did not have the tactics to fight insurgents who blended into the countryside. It was not until the Dutch colonial government solved both of these problems that an effective counterinsurgency strategy was employed.

Historians of twentieth century counterinsurgency doctrine have been particularly good at showing its historical development in British and American armies, and how they have sought to learn and adapt from previous conflicts to refine these doctrines. Less, though, has been written about how these counter-insurgencies came to be embedded in political systems.² More recently, historians of Southeast Asian politics have been effective at showing how counter-insurgencies became part of military regimes. I take my cue from scholars such as Mary Callahan, who has effectively shown how the military counter-insurgencies of Burma in the 1940s and 1950s led to the establishment of a military regime that treated Burmese citizens as enemies.³ In the Acehnese case, the Dutch colonial government had no set of counterinsurgency doctrines to draw upon, based upon experiences in the Netherlands East Indies or elsewhere. The war did lead, however, to a way of policing colonial society, which incorporated counterinsurgency tactics in every-day control of the populace.

After 1898, the lessons and techniques of the Dutch counterinsurgency in Aceh were incorporated directly into the colonial regime, which allowed for targeted violent suppression to be a regular element of civilian rule. It was not until the charismatic and ambitious Colonel J.B. van Heutsz teamed up with the orientalist C. Snouck Hurgronje that the Dutch colonial government developed an effective counterinsurgency campaign, which combined mobile military units with policies designed to isolate the Acehnese leaders opposed to the Dutch colonial government. At its core this was a form of colonial rule, which combined political insight about the Acehnese with a flexible military arm. Two men of very different education, temperament, and politics (and who after their usefulness to each other ran out in 1906, strongly disliked each other in later life), not only worked together, but managed to invent a counterinsurgency campaign that could be smoothly integrated into colonial governance. The final result was not only the defeat of the Acehnese resistance, but the creation of a new tool of the colonial government. Mobile

military power could be called upon to suppress any opposition to Dutch authority. And with both military officials and colonial experts fighting all resistance as if it were a counterinsurgency, targeted, violent responses became a routine means of maintaining control for the remaining 40 years of Dutch colonial rule.

The war began in 1873, at the beginning of a period of imperial conquest, in which a collaboration of ambitious colonial officials, private-sector backing and the Dutch Parliament sought to expand the Netherlands East Indies to include all the lands of the archipelago not already controlled by another European power. Aceh had for more than a half-century been off-limits to the Dutch because the 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty had guaranteed Acehnese independence. Once this stipulation was removed in a new treaty in 1871, claims, many false or exaggerated, quickly surfaced of Acehnese duplicity, suggesting they were scheming against the Dutch. The colonial authorities in Batavia, the capital of the Dutch colony the Netherlands East Indies, were not hard to convince, and by 1873 they authorized an invasion force. When that expedition was repelled, a larger invasion force was more carefully prepared, which landed in late 1873. By January of 1874 the Dutch captured the sultan's palace without firing a shot. Shortly thereafter, the Dutch military, under the command of Colonel Pel, began a military administration of all of Aceh, on the assumption that with the capture of the sultan's palace, the Acehnese fighting spirit was broken. The Dutch formally incorporated all of Aceh in the Netherlands East Indies, and the military began building a garrison in the town around the sultan's palace, known as Kotaraja, but now with the Dutch as the sovereigns.⁴ In fact, the Acehnese fighters, including the Sultan, had simply withdrawn from the town in advance of the Dutch expeditionary force, and took to the valleys and mountains, and the agricultural heartland of Aceh. For the next few decades, the Acehnese fought a sustained insurgency campaign against the Dutch forces. And while the Dutch were able to maintain control of the capital city, their response to the resistance was largely ineffective until 1896.

Initially the Dutch believed Aceh would be controlled by defeating its sultan, as had worked elsewhere in the colony. They clung to this idea tenaciously. In the early 1880s, the Dutch colonial government installed a civilian administration in Aceh, made up of officials transplanted from Java, to control the countryside.⁵ Subsequent resistance showed their misplaced confidence, and starting in 1884, the peculiar challenge of Aceh was acknowledged. By then, the Aceh-insurgency worried Dutch politicians and colonial officials; the Dutch empire seemed to be under siege. What followed was a series of military strategies meant to secure and bolster colonial rule in the area. The first, began in 1884, was the creation of a concentrated line around Kotaradja, made up of sixteen garrisoned posts linked by phone lines and a steam tramway, which created a kind of Dutch Green Zone. Right from the start, the fortified positions were under near constant siege, and few Dutch ventured outside the safety of the line.⁶ Within the fifty square kilometers of the militarized zone, a military governor and officials had both civil and military authority. After 1884, military officers became responsible for civil administration, judicial rulings, and even the crafting of policy – they were a miniature military state and as I will go into later, the nursery from which methods of controlling dissident segments of the population grew. The Dutch defensive posts, however, were under continuous threat of attack, and Acehnese rebels routinely infiltrated the concentrated line to stage attacks against Dutch officials. The Dutch quickly began cutting deals with Acehnese elites in an effort to maintain peace. This included Teukoe Oemar, an important Acehnese chieftain paid and outfitted by the Dutch colonial government, and someone the Dutch expected would be able to rule all of Aceh in their name.

As the Acehese problem became a thorn in the side of the Dutch empire, it became the responsibility of the governor general in Buitenzorg to solve it. The mini-military state was forced to accept help from other colonial officials. With the perceived stakes very high, the empire gathered new ideas about solving the Acehese problem. This pressure also allowed young officials, with new ideas about cracking the Acehese nut, to influence policy. At the end of the 1880s, Van Heutsz, doing his third tour in Aceh, became a trusted advisor to the military governor of Aceh, Van Teijn, where he created new units which launched lightning strikes on the interior. After 1890, these anti-guerrilla units were able to chase down rebels far outside the concentrated line.⁷ And in 1891, Governor General Pijnacker Hordijk sent the orientalist Snouck Hurgronje to Aceh, to conduct an extensive investigation of Acehese society. Snouck Hurgronje was already a well-known expert about Islam, who had published a book about Mecca based on an extended visit in the city closed to non-Muslims, and had since 1889 been part of the colonial administration. His report of May 1892 established him not just as an expert about Aceh, but as a principal advisor on political and military policies to defeat the insurgency.⁸

In the twentieth century in the Netherlands, the two men became legends, largely because of their leadership in the counterinsurgency. The Van Heutsz myth is older. After 1901, Van Heutsz emerged as the conqueror of Aceh, and his career was capped by four years as the governor general of the Netherlands East Indies. After his death in 1924, he was remembered by many colonial officials as the man who had done most to keep the empire together, and who had provided a moral compass for the Dutch as colonizers. In 1935, the Van Heutsz monument was erected in Amsterdam, and through the 1940s, invoking his memory continued to serve as a rallying cry for Dutch imperial power.⁹ The history of the Van Heutsz myth is largely beyond the scope of this paper, but at its core it is about his role in pacifying Aceh. A number of counter-myths have arisen; in Jakarta in 1950, the Van Heutsz monument was torn down, and the street it was on renamed after Teukoe Oemar, the Acehese chieftain who turned against his Dutch paymasters. Since the fall of their empire in 1949, another counter-myth to Van Heutsz's memory has centered upon Snouck Hurgronje, and his credit in pacifying the Acehese.¹⁰ All of these myths, however, occlude the real importance of their cooperation. This is not the story of just a great military tactician, an inspiring leader, a fearless commanding officer – Van Heutsz – or a brilliant, insightful, and penetrating analyst of Acehese strengths and weakness – Snouck Hurgronje. The personal bond between soldier and intellectual was subsequently institutionalized, and became the root of the colony's ability to suppress, violently if necessary, any colonial unrest.

The 1892 report about society, culture and politics in Aceh was the basis of Snouck's authority in government circles. The ethnographic and political description of the report was published in book-form shortly thereafter.¹¹ The policy conclusions, in which Snouck sketched a broad approach to establishing territorial hegemony in Aceh, were kept secret, but they were reproduced in a printed edition of his papers in 1957. Snouck's secret report stressed that in Islamic societies such as Aceh, religious faith and political culture were naturally distinct. According to Snouck, Acehese peasants followed their local territorial rulers, the *uleebelang*, whose traditions were governed by *adat* (local traditions). Acehese peasants had traditionally deferred to the *uleebelang*, but recently had begun following the *ulama*, who professed a new form of political, Islamic leadership. For Snouck, this conclusion suggested a political intervention which went far beyond circumventing the sultanate, which had little authority. He argued that the *ulama* (as well as certain adventurer *uleebelang* not tied hereditarily to the land) would need to be eliminated by venturing

beyond the concentrated line. The Dutch administration would then need to rebuild Acehnese trust in the Dutch, by sponsoring agricultural initiatives and encouraging trade. He also suggested that the Dutch civil and military officials be aided by experts who could help the administration to craft policies that would allow subtlety in distinguishing between potential Acehnese allies and arch enemies. His own future role goes unmentioned, but these conclusions would seem to necessitate his inclusion in the future crafting of administrative policies.¹² Under Governor General Pijnacker Hordijk this did not happen, especially since his military governor in Aceh, Major-General C. Deijkerhoff, believed Snouck had exaggerated the power of the ulamas.¹³

The new Governor General C.H.A. van der Wijck who took over in 1893, however, began to regularly consult Snouck, even though Deijkerhoff had some spectacular success in 1894 after an army under the command of Dutch ally Teukoe Oemar captured much of the highlands East and West of the Acehnese valley. The new governor general was not satisfied with the subdued military presence pursued by Deijkerhoff, now promoted to general, as Van der Wijck's decision to invade Lombok in 1894 shows. He began to use Snouck as a sounding board, asking his advice about Aceh policy.¹⁴ Moreover, Snouck felt sufficiently secure that in a lengthy letter to the governor general in 1896, he not only defended his own positions, often by citing his book about Aceh, but sternly criticized General Deijkerhoff.¹⁵ And even though the letter was written just prior to Teukoe Oemar's treason, in which the Acehnese chieftain turned his Dutch weapons against his former Dutch allies, it arrived on Van der Wijck's desk just as the betrayal became known. Van der Wijck sacked Deijkerhoff, and prepared a large military expedition against the Dutch empire's chief villain, and Snouck was positioned to make his mark on colonial rule.

Most histories of Snouck's involvement in Aceh stress the importance of his theories about Islam in Acehnese society and politics. This should give us pause. Research by the anthropologist James Siegel on the place of Islam in modern Acehnese society has argued convincingly that the *uleebelang* were not hereditary territorial leaders, a point of departure from Snouck, but successful traders who controlled local markets as well as the trade in and out of Aceh. Moreover, this economic position had been bolstered by political authority derived from official appointments from the sultan. Moreover, the *ulama* were by the late 19th century integrated into the Acehnese villages, often much more closely than the *uleebelang*.¹⁶ And the conflict that Snouck and other colonial experts believed separated adat and Islamic law, was a colonial fantasy.¹⁷ The success of the counterinsurgency cannot be due to a doctrine built on such errors.

Nonetheless, Snouck played a key role in the Acehnese counterinsurgency. He was, do not misunderstand, very well informed about Aceh, and was insightful about Acehnese society and politics, even if he misunderstood the place of Islam. But having established himself as an expert on Islam and Aceh, and having won the confidence of the governor general, he helped craft the counterinsurgency policies. And this had nothing to do with doctrine or social-theory. In letters between Snouck and Van der Wijck, they discussed military appointments, counterinsurgency tactics, and military troop deployments.¹⁸ Snouck, in particular, pushed for Van Heutsz to be given greater responsibilities; in 1892, when Van Heutsz was in Batavia at the same time as Snouck, the two had discussed the Aceh-problem extensively, and both were opposed to the concentrated line. A series of articles and memos written by Van Heutsz in 1892 and 1893 had brought Van Heutsz to the attention of the Governor General. Snouck often found time to remind Van der Wijck that Van Heutsz was the man of the future, who would break the Gordian knot in Aceh.¹⁹

In mid-1896, Van der Wijck replaced Deijkerhoff with J.A. Vetter, the so-called butcher of Lombok, and gave him wide latitude to pursue his own military options.²⁰ Vetter created two large units of the 1,000 soldiers each, most of whom had fought for him in Lombok. Starting in 1896, these units scoured the Acehnese countryside, destroying villages in their entirety. These scorched-earth expeditions continued through 1897, and although they were successful in chasing Teukoe Oemar's allies, they did not lessen Acehnese resistance.

In 1898, Van der Wijck appointed Van Heutsz as Governor of Aceh. In close consultation with Snouck, who joined Van Heutsz in Aceh, they then developed a plan to permanently pacify Aceh through political and military means.²¹ This led to the first large-scale forays under Van Heutsz's command, which in mid-1898 led to an expedition of 7,500 men to Pedir, the heart of resistance in the mountains of the Acehnese northeastern coast. In the aftermath of the Pedir expedition, Van Heutsz and Snouck put in practice a counter-guerrilla warfare, in which small, mobile units, largely comprised of native soldiers from Ambon and Java, attacked insurgents. By the fall of 1898, these units had captured a number of high-level rebels, although at that time Teukoe Oemar escaped them. Snouck continued to be involved in developing an administrative framework, and wrote a standard contract for those *ulebelangs* cooperating with the Dutch, the "Short Declaration," in which local chiefs signed away sovereignty to the Dutch colonial government, while at the same time it gave them official recognition as local political authorities. Snouck's "Short Declaration" was first used in Aceh in late 1898.²² Snouck's own account of the Pedir expedition appeared in an Indies newspaper later in 1898, in which he boasted of the policies' success.²³ The fighting continued through 1901; Teukoe Oemar was killed in 1899, and thereafter the insurgency was on the defensive. The Dutch now staffed a viable civil administration, in which Dutch bureaucrats worked closely with compliant *ulebelang*.

I want to finish with three conclusions about the long-term repercussions of the Acehnese counterinsurgency campaign after 1896. First, it highlights the importance of mobile fighting units, which could inflict violence and damage well beyond the safety of cities and garrisons. But this is hardly sufficient, as it was not until Van Heutsz took command of these forces that they were effective. Second, the campaign demonstrates that mobile forces need more than good intelligence about the location of their enemies. They need an overall framework for understanding who, amongst the insurgent population might support them, and who will not. Prior to Snouck Hurgronje's involvement in the fight, the counterinsurgency operations concentrated on defeating as many of the enemy as possible, without contemplating which native elites would make good future governing partners. And third, this counterinsurgency operation required a close working relationship between intellectuals, military officers, and governing bureaucrats. The counter-guerrilla warfare only worked after old barriers came down, and new forms of collaboration grew between colonial officials whose jobs had previously not been understood as overlapping.

This new relationship ushered in the height of Dutch colonialism, in which the Dutch governing authorities used mobile violence as an effective tool against armed opposition. Native informants, cultural experts, policemen and military officers worked closely together to maintain the peace or order of the Netherlands East Indies. The Dutch did not fight an insurgency campaign for the next four decades, because they did not need to. In Bali in 1906, and after Van Heutsz had become Governor General, a major invasion force took south Bali by storm, and the war ended with a battle between the large Dutch force and the king of Bali and his family.²⁴ Insurgencies, as well as peasant-revolts, political riots, and insurrections, were stamped out before they got started, because of the close collaboration between a wide range of colonial officials, both Dutch and natives, who were

able to rapidly summon a military force to target the unrest. This then is the legacy of the Acehese counterinsurgency: the establishment of a colonial government able to summon violent response purposeful to any threat. And this arrangement does not hinge on a particular doctrine, but rather on elite consensus.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca 2005).
- 4 Klaas van der Maaten, *Snouck Hurgronje en de Atjeh oorlog*, vol. 1 (Leiden 1948), 8-9.
- 5 H.W. van den Doel, *Het Rijk van Insulinde: Opkomst en ondergang van een Nederlandse kolonie* (Amsterdam 1996), 129.
- 6 H.W. van den Doel, "Military rule in the Netherlands Indies", in: Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies 1880-1942* (Leiden 1994), 57-78 at 62.
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- 8 E. Gobée, "Inleiding", in: E. Gobée and C. Adriaanse (eds.), *Ambtelijke adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje*, vol. 1 ('s-Gravenhage 1957), ix-xxi and Harry Benda, "Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje and the Foundations of Dutch Islamic Policy in Indonesia", *The Journal of Modern History*, 30, no. 4 (1958), 338-47.
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- 11 C. Snouck Hurgronje, *De Atjèthers*, 2 vols. (Batavia 1893-94). The English translation appeared subsequently, as C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Achenese*, 2 vols. (Leiden 1906).
- 12 The secret part of the 1892 report was published as "Het Atjèh-verslag", in: Gobée and Adriaanse (eds.), *Ambtelijke adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje*, vol. 1, 50-97.
- 13 Veer, *De Atjeh Oorlog*, 191.
- 14 See for example his answer to the governor general's question about awarding special decorations to Acehese allies (he was against it), C. Snouck Hurgronje to C.H.A. van der Wijck, 7 September 1894, in: Gobée and Adriaanse (eds.), *Ambtelijke adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje*, vol. 1, 164-65.
- 15 C. Snouck Hurgronje to C.H.A. van der Wijck, 8 March 1896, in: Gobée and Adriaanse (eds.), *Ambtelijke adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje*, vol. 1, 178-205.
- 16 James Siegel, *The Rope of God* (Ann Arbor 2000).
- 17 Taufik Abdullah, "Adat and Islam: An Examination of Conflict in Minangkabau", *Indonesia* 2 (1966), 1-24.
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- 19 Veer, *De Atjeh oorlog*, 186-98.
- 20 Van der Wijck to Snouck Hurgronje, 13 June 1896, in Maaten, *Snouck Hurgronje*, vol. 2, 2-3. Shortly thereafter, Snouck wrote under a pseudonym a lengthy criticism of the concentrated line and the Deijkerhoff policies, in a Dutch newspaper. Toekoe Mansour [C. Snouck Hurgronje], "Atjeh", in: *Verspreide geschriften van C. Snouck Hurgronje*, vol. 4, *Geschriften betreffende den Islam in Nederlandsch-Indië*, part 1 (Bonn 1924), 315-26.
- 21 "Ontwerp-instructie", in: Gobée and Adriaanse (eds.), *Ambtelijke adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje*, vol. 1, 226-30.
- 22 Martin Bossenbroek, "Joannes Benedictus van Heutsz en de leer van het functionele geweld", in: Beliën, Bossenbroek and Van Setten, *In de vaart der volken*, 87-96.
- 23 Si Gam [C. Snouck Hurgronje], "De Pedir-expeditie", *Verspreide geschriften van C. Snouck Hurgronje*, Vol. 4, *Geschriften betreffende den Islam in Nederlandsch-Indië*, part 1, 333-46.
- 24 Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali* (Ithaca 1995).