



FPRI A Military Anthropologist Looks at Islamic Insurgency in Aceh

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Abstract: *Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1858-1936), a Dutch scholar of Islam, served as a “military anthropologist” in during the Aceh war in the Dutch East Indies. The Acehnese fighters viewed their anti-colonial struggle against the Dutch as a jihad, construing themselves religious martyrs fighting “infidel invaders,” and carrying out suicide attacks with a machete or dagger. To combat this insurgency Snouck Hurgronje, one of the first Westerners to visit Mecca and author of many books on Islam, developed the so-called “Aceh method,” which became the basis of modern Dutch counterinsurgency strategy. This article addresses the question: what can we learn from the life and times of Snouck Hurgronje?*

“On my back shall I return;
None shall dare to fetch me from the enemy's land.
At my departure I have spat upon the steps of the house;
No man can see the world twice”

- Acehnese song of a hero's departure¹

In June 1898, an elite military force advanced on Pedir, the center of Acehnese resistance to the Dutch colonial government of the East Indies. Their mission was to pacify the local guerillas fighting a “holy war” against the Dutch, led by commanders who incited rebellion with the Prophet's words. The Dutch had been unsuccessfully fighting the Islamic insurgency for more than twenty years, but this mission would be different: instead of advancing in long closed columns (more suited to the Battle of Waterloo than jungle warfare)² the new Korps Marechaussee composed of hand-selected, highly trained indigenous soldiers led by Dutch officers would move

¹ Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *Achehnese* (Leiden: Brill, 1906), Vol. 2, p. 67.

² Martin Thiry, *Colonial Police in the Dutch East Indies: The Case of the Ambonese Armed Police (1897-1942)*, Dissertation, University Of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Aug. 2013, p. 71.

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quickly through the terrain, carrying the new repeating rifle and sabers.³ Instead of burning down whole villages, the Korps Marechaussee would, in the words of their commander Van Heutsz, give the Acehnese “a sensitive beating” and place “the foot on the neck.”⁴

Accompanying the Korps Marechaussee on the expedition to Pedir was a Dutch scholar of Islam, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1858-1936).⁵ His role was to provide intelligence and interrogate prisoners,⁶ but more importantly to serve as what we might now call a “military anthropologist.”⁷ One of the first Westerners to visit Mecca and author of many books on Islam, his advice to the Dutch colonial government was that while Islam *as a religion* posed no danger to the state, Islam *as a political ideology* was dangerous: “With this hostile party there is no point in negotiating, since their doctrine and their self-interest cause them not to bend unless to the use of force. A *conditio sine qua non* for a restoration of order in Great Aceh is to crush them heavily...”⁸ Concurrent to military destruction, Snouck Hurgronje argued that the Dutch must consolidate political control, provide economic reconstruction, improve education and assimilate the local population into the Dutch society. The “Aceh method” became the basis of modern Dutch counterinsurgency strategy.⁹

As one historian wrote, “Snouck Hurgronje did more than influence the Islamic policy of the colonial government: in a very real sense he created it and, along with his successors, implemented it.”¹⁰ Despite (or perhaps because of) this, many

³ Snouck Hurgronje, *Achehnese* Vol. 1, p. xv; Thiry, *Colonial Police in The Dutch East Indies*, pp. 63-69.

⁴ Van Heutsz, quoted in Thijs W. Brocades Zaalberg, “The Roots of Dutch Counterinsurgency,” in Richard G. Davis, ed., *U.S. Army and Irregular Warfare 1775-2007* (St. John's Press, 2016), p. 123.

⁵ Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Sumatran Sultanate and Colonial State: Jambi and the Rise of Dutch Imperialism, 1830-1907* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 192, 205. See, also, Michael F. Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003), p. 89.

⁶ Thijs W. Brocades Zaalberg, “The Roots of Dutch Counterinsurgency,” in Richard G. Davis, ed., *U.S. Army and Irregular Warfare 1775-2007* (St. John's Press, 2016), p. 123.

⁷ Military anthropology can be loosely characterized as social science research that has the military as a client, that employs on-the-ground empirical research methods, and that has as a practical (rather than purely scientific) objective. See, Montgomery McFate, *Military Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Bronislaw Malinowski, *Dynamics of Culture Change: An Inquiry into Race Relations in Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), p. 4; Peter Pels, [“Anthropology of Colonialism: Culture, History, and the Emergence of Western Governmentality.”](#) *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 26 (1997), pp. 163-183.

⁸ Snouck Hurgronje quoted in W.F. Wertheim, “Counter-Insurgency Research at the Turn of the Century - Snouck Hurgronje and the Aceh War,” *Sociologische Gids*, Vol. 19 (1972), p. 324.

⁹ Andrew Goss, “Mobile Warriors and Cosmopolitan Intellectuals: The Legacy of the Dutch Counterinsurgency in Colonial Aceh,” in *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: Irregular Warfare from 1800 to the Present*, Proceedings of the XXXVI International Congress of Military History, Amsterdam, 2010, edited by Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, Jan Hoffenaar and Alan Lemmers, NIMH, 2011, pp. 625-30.

¹⁰ Robert Van Niel, “Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje: In Memory of the Centennial of his Birth,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Aug. 1957, p. 594.

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