

In Aceh, women's involvement in war is a well-known phenomenon. Local oral history traditions, and later, local Indonesian and Acehnese historiography, have helped transmit prominent figures of widowed heroines, such as Laksamana Keumalahayati (c. 1600), Cut Nyak Dhien (1850-1908) or Cut Meutia (1870-1910). But these idealised accounts have been constructed at the expense of the ordinary foot folk, making it difficult for the present generation of *Inong Balee*¹ - women combatants in the province's most recent conflict - to re-integrate and claim their place in post-conflict Acehnese society.

Images of the past and realities of the present:

Aceh's *Inong Balee*

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How do valiant women warriors become heroines? Since Indonesia's formal independence in 1949, two Indonesian-language publication waves have strongly moulded the Acehnese and Indonesian perception (and reception) of the *Inong Balee*. Both waves, in the 1950s/60s and the 1990s, show a competition for these heroines that closely mirrors the tense Jakarta-Aceh relations of the time. The accounts either highlight the participation of Acehnese heroines in Indonesian nation building, or emphasise the exceptional character of Acehnese women as evidence of Aceh's particularity compared with the rest of Indonesia.

Epic terms

Despite disagreements with regard to the 'ownership' of these heroines, both the Indonesian and the Acehnese interpretations essentially agree on the same archetypal image of a woman warrior: always brave and daring, beautiful, more often than not widowed, usually descended from nobility and frequently fated to die a martyr's death. A particularly intriguing aspect, in particular given Aceh's proud Islamic identity, of the making of such archetypal heroines is that at least half of the accounts on Acehnese women warriors refer to a warrior heroine from the most famous Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*,² in their title and content. Not only has Srikandi, who is well known in Javanese culture, become a national symbol of heroism in her own right, but she has also been used to re-cast Aceh's female combatants in epic terms.

It appears that the wide dissemination of these mythologised accounts is largely the legacy of Ali Hasjmy, the first post-independence governor of Aceh, who spent his life collecting and writing the history of Aceh. Later on, other local and foreign historians incorporated his collected stories into their own work. As a result, several oral traditions, together with information taken from European sources, have been woven into one single streamlined and authoritative account, even though the historical evidence does not always support it.

A particularly striking example of how fact and fiction have become one are the heroic deeds of the 16th century female leader, Laksamana (Admiral) Keumalahayati, popularly known as Malahayati. Following her husband's death in a campaign that had widowed many other women, she is reported to have created a seaborne army of widowed women, the *Armada Inong Balee*. The fleet is said to have twice defeated the Dutch: first the brothers de Houteman in 1599, then van Caerden's ships in 1601. Indonesian historiography cites the accounts of John Davis, an English captain who visited Aceh in 1599, and Dutch novelist Marie van Zeggelen (1870-1957), which highlight that Malahayati killed Cornelis de Houteman herself, and captured his brother Frederick.

However, upon verification, John Davis only reported that "a woman is [the sultan's] Admiral, for he will trust no men"³ and none of the Dutch sources of the time mention Keumalahayati's name or a battle with van Caerden. In contrast, van Zeggelen's account depicts Malahayati as a mysterious admiral who is described by means of clichés, the same ones used for all female warriors. She is said to have been from a lineage of great combatants, widow of a soldier, of noble character, displaying extreme bravery, and always holding a *rencong* (an Acehnese knife, similar to the more famous *keris*).

It thus appears that a Dutch novelist and children's author, who had followed her officer husband from garrison to garrison in the 1890-1916 period, re-invented the historical Malahayati in the image of mythological



The arrest of Cut Dyak Dhien. Image first reproduced in *Prominent Women in the Glimpse of History*, by Ismail Sofyan, M. Hasan Basry and T. Ibrahim Alfian (ed). Jakarta: Jayakarta Agung, 1994.

Hindu-Javanese heroine Srikandi. An image that post-independence Indonesian authors, led by the indefatigable Ali Hasjmy, in search of pre-colonial glory, found all too appealing, infinitely quotable and conveniently forgot to verify van Zeggelen's sources.

Acehnese heroines of the 19th century, Cut Nyak Dhien and Cut Meutia, are similarly presented as continuing the fight of their dead husbands, sometimes exceeding them in passion and constancy. By providing very few details on their life and personality, a uniform image of the archetypal Acehnese woman combatant has been perpetuated. This bias, present since the first romanticised Dutch accounts, has created a simplified history made up of one-dimensional icons. As a result, romanced stories of a few select figures have become the sole historical reference points of Acehnese women warriors in general.

'Forgotten' women

It is interesting to note that others heroines of the 19th century are less present in local historiography. Dutch sources attest to the existence of women warriors such as Pocut Baren (1880-1933), Pocut Meurah Intan (d. 1937), Pocut Meuligo (n.d.), Teungku Fakinah (d. 1933) and Teungku Cutpo Fatimah (d. 1912)⁴, yet these women are far less present in the oral tradition, and as a consequence seldom re-narrated by local authors.

The reason could be that these figures, 'forgotten' by local historiography, do not always fit the archetypal frame of the noble, beautiful and successful elite warrior woman. Pocut Baren, for example, was not a beauty but a one-legged combatant amputee. This, and the fact that the Dutch gave

her medical attention, repatriated her, but also re-instated her as a member of the *uleebalang* - the local Acehnese elite who ruled a territory but recognised the higher authority of the sultan and later the Dutch - made her an unlikely post-independence heroine. Not only that, but Lieutenant H. Scheurleer reported that she tried to create orderliness, security and prosperity under Dutch authority, an attitude that does not fit the usual image of the woman combatant hateful of her enemy. From an anti-colonial perspective, of course, she would have been seen as a collaborator or even traitor.

In a similar way, a severely wounded Pocut Meurah Intan accepted treatment from a Dutch lieutenant, Veltman, rather than committing suicide; and Teungku Fakinah did not die as martyr but continued to live in peace in a *dayah* (traditional Acehnese religious school). If these women still represent isolated, widowed combatants originating from Acehnese nobility, their profile differs markedly from the heroic trinity that provides the dominant official image of the *Inong Balee*: Malahayati, Cut Nyak Dhien, and Cut Meutia.

At the beginning of the 20th century, further non-hegemonic discourse on groups of women combatants can be found in Dutch telegrams sent from Aceh to the Netherlands East Indies' Governor-General in Java. They mention women villagers armed with *rencong* attacking the colonial *marechaussee* (Dutch military police), hiding weapons and munitions, and said to be disguised in men's black-coloured clothes. These anonymous women villagers who, in reality, were just wearing their traditional dark pants - *luweu tham asèe* (dog-chasing trousers) - are far removed from the

exclusive circle of Acehnese nobility, and show a more popular face of the Inong Balee. However, in Dutch reports these women remained a question mark. Surprisingly, they were not qualified as enemy (*vijanden*) but as women (*vrouwen*), a special category, and viewed as 'accidentally' killed by Dutch police.⁵ This fact reveals that the Dutch could not imagine women combatants as a general phenomenon, and explains local historiography's preference for leaders rather than the mass of female foot soldiers.

Inong Balee today

Contemporary accounts of *Inong Balee*⁶ are far closer to these Dutch telegrams than to the stories of the archetypal Acehnese woman warrior. They deal with common people, young girls, widows or married women, who joined the struggle against the Indonesian state by engaging in the military or civilian structure of *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (Free Aceh Movement), known as GAM.⁷ They were members of all-female combatant and mixed gender units, but they were also individual women fighters, cooks, logisticians, fundraisers, nurses, propagandists, and part of the intelligence service.

Trained for anything from a few days to three months, these women were taught how to fix and use weapons. They received lectures on ideology, ethics and military attitude, as well as in strategy and guerilla tactics. They officially became GAM *Inong Balee* after a formal ceremony during which they swore "I promise to Allah to sacrifice my possessions and my life for the nation because there is just one and unique God".

As their situation during the conflict greatly differed from one region to another, their experiences as *Inong Balee* cannot be reduced to one single meaning. In Linge (central Aceh), for example, *Inong Balee* managed



Cut Meutia by Javanese artist, Dede Eri Supria.

logistics and acted mostly as intelligence (*pateung*), gathering information for the TNA (*Teuntara Neugara Aceh*), GAM's military wing. Their situation fluctuated from day to day, with an inconstant and often broken network of *Inong Balee* who assisted and supported GAM. In contrast, in Meureuhom Daja (western coast), women combatants assumed military roles in villages but also in the jungle where they were part of male TNA units in Lhok Sukhon *sagoe*.⁸ In another case, in Pase (eastern coast), *Inong Balee* were organised as an autonomous women-only group, "*Pasukan Inong Balee*" (*Inong Balee* Troops). Here they were deployed in villages and in the mountains, sometimes also conducting guerilla attacks or acts of sabotage. The roles of these women combatants were varied and their organisation was uneven throughout Aceh, with hierarchical structures more or less marked.

As GAM rarely recorded data due to the nature of guerilla warfare, and existing records were often destroyed or lost, an exact evaluation of the *Inong Balee* seems impossible. The only certitude is that losses were significant during the the most recent state of military emergency (2003-2005), a critical time when women became far more involved than during the 1989-98 period. In spite of this, after the signing of the Helsinki peace agreement, few *Inong Balee* were automatically recognised by GAM leaders as having taken part in the struggle. This is even more surprising given

the organisation's open propaganda regarding their women fighters and reference to the ubiquitous Malahayati, Cut Nyak Dhien, and Cut Meutia.

Many of the GAM's *Inong Balee* did not expect anything in return for their contribution, often because they wanted to erase a painful past marked by privation, not to mention possible torture or rape. But others were waiting for recognition of their involvement and intended to continue to play an active role in shaping the future of their province. For these *Inong Balee*, the main problem has been to obtain recognition of their status which has often been reduced or negated. Although similar post-conflict trajectories can be observed elsewhere⁹ another key mechanism appears to be at work in Aceh. According to the Acehnese collective consciousness, a woman warrior had to fit the image of exceptional women leaders such as Cut Nyak Dhien or Cut Meutia. Of course, the life and exploits of the majority of *Inong Balee* differed from this exalted image, and as a result they were not recognised as combatants, but rather considered GAM widows or supporters.

This lack of recognition has meant that for many female army members, who took the same risks as their male counterparts, peace has a bitter

Srikandi, warrior heroine from the Mahabharata, used to re-cast Aceh's female combatants in epic terms.



Cut Nyak Dhien, by Javanese artist, Dede Eri Supria.

taste. A number of *Inong Balee*, however, have decided not to remain an abstract image of the past, and want to play an active role in the building of their *nanggroe*, i.e. their land and culture. For that reason they have strengthened their organisation and raised their voice. The Acehnese Women's League (*Liga Inong Aceh* – LINA) was formed in June 2006 by the activist Shadia Marhaban and a GAM senior, Nur Djuli, to help these female combatants find a proper place in the reintegration process. Then, in 2007, Muzakir Manaf, the highest commander of the former TNA made one of them head of the *Inong Balee* in the Transnational Committee of Aceh (*Komite Peralihan Aceh*, KPA). Despite this official recognition by former GAM officials and members, the challenge for these female combatants now remains to be understood and accepted in wider Acehnese society. A recognition that neither Laksamana Malahayati nor Aceh's Queen Tadj Al Alam (r. 1641-1675), the first of four women sultans in a row, had to fight for.

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Notes

- 1 In Acehnese language, literally the women who have been left by their husband, designate divorced women, widows, and as an extension, the women combatants who for the majority have lost their husband in the conflict. In this paper we will use the term for women combatants, whether widowed or not.
- 2 Srikandi loyally fought on Arjuna's side during the Bratayuda War, slaying his enemies, in order to win the married prince's heart.
- 3 Markham, Albert Hastings. (ed) 1880. *The Voyages and Works of John Davis the Navigator*. London: Hakluyt Society.
- 4 Cut is a frequent nobility title, Pocut an honorific title reserved for wise women, and Teungku is a term for religious personality.
- 5 Siapno, Jacqueline. 2002. *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State in Aceh: The Paradox of Power, Co-optation and Resistance*. Richmond: RoutledgeCurzon.
- 6 Information collected in interviews with several informants conducted in Takengon, Banda Aceh, Meulaboh, Sigli and Lhokseumawe in December 2006 and May 2007.
- 7 As the GAM considered Aceh as a sovereign state and not as part of the Indonesian Republic, it had its own civilian and military structure.
- 8 GAM's administrative and military division of Aceh followed the pre-colonial order when territory was divided in *wilayah*, *sagoe*, *mukim* and *gampong*. A *wilayah* (region) is composed of 3 to 4 *sagoe* (sub-districts).
- 9 See, e.g., the contributions by Sue Blackburn and Jacqueline Siapno in this issue of IIAS Newsletter.