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 publica-
tion waves have strongly moulded the Acehnese and Indonesian percep-
tion (and reception) of the Inong Balee. Both waves, in the 1950s and
the 1990s, show a competition for these heroines that closely mirrors the
tense Jakarta-Aceh relations of the time. The accounts either highlight
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The arrest of Cut Dyak Dhiem. Image first repro-
duced in Prominent Women in the Glimpse of History, by
Ismaill Sitorus, M. Hasan Bary and T. Ibrahim Alfian
(IJAS, Jakarta: JSB, 2014).

Inong Balee: Mahalayati, Cut Nyak Dhien,
and Cut Meutia.

Acehnese heroines of the 19th century, Cut Nyak Dhiem 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 his-
tory made up of one-dimensional icons. As a result, romantic 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a few select figures have become the sole historical reference points of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 Meuligo (n.d.),
Teungku Fakinah (d. 1933) and Teungku Cato Fatimah (d. 1937), 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 success-
ful 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 reinstated her as a mem-
ber of the ulameh - the local Acehnese elite who ruled a territory.

In 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 keris and rencong attacking the colonial
marachaussee (traditional Acehnese religious school). If these women still
represent isolated, widowed combatants originating from Acehnese nobil-
ity, their profile differs markedly from the heroic trinity that provides the
female warrior of the Mahabharata

In a similar way, a severely wounded Pocut Meuligo Intan accepted treat-
ment from a Dutch lieutenant, yet she continued to live in peace
in a dayah (traditional Acehnese religious school). If these women still
represent isolated, widowed combatants originating from Acehnese nobil-
ity, their profile differs markedly from the heroic trinity that provides the
dominant official image of the Inong Balee: Mahalayati, Cut Nyak Dhiem,
and Cut Meutia.

At the beginning of the 21st 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
marachaussee (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 - keuau tham aile (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’. 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 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. 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 more or less marked. In one case, in Pase (eastern coast), women combatants assumed military roles in villages but also in the jungle where they were part of male TNA (transnational armed opposition GAM). In Meureuhom Daja (western coast), women combatants 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 guerrilla attacks or acts of sabotage. The roles of these women combatants were varied and their own image was uneven throughout Aceh, with hierarchical structures more or less marked.

As GAM rarely recorded data due to the nature of guerrilla warfare, and existing records were often destroyed or lost, an exact evaluation of the Inong Balee seems impossible. The only certainty is that losses were significant during 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 leadership, but they were also considered GAM widows or supporters.

**Srikanth, warrior heroine from the Mahabharata, used to re-cast Aceh’s female combatants in epic terms.**

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 elsewhere, 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 idealised 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 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 nangroe, 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 Djilai, to help these female combatants find a proper place in the reintegration process. Then, in 2007, Muzakir Marul, the highest commander of the former TNA made one of them head of the Inong Bale 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, desolate 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. Srikanth loyally fought on Arjuna’s side during the Bratayuda War, slaying his enemies, in order to win the married prince’s heart.


4. Cut is a frequent nobility title, Pout an honorific title reserved for wise women, and Tengku is a term for religious personality.


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 model when territory was divided in areal, sub-districts.

9. See, e.g., the contributions by Sue Blakburn and Jacqueline Siapno in this issue of IIAS Newsletter.