

Counter-insurgency research at the turn of the century – Snouck Hurgronje and the Aceh War

by W. F. Wertheim

1 — At a time when our Dutch newspapers were full of the atrocities of My-lai and other places in Southeast Asia, it was a sobering experience to be reminded, through television interviews and press publications, of excesses and brutalities, committed by the Dutch colonial army during the so-called 'police actions' (1947-1949) in Indonesia.¹ Similarly in view of our sharp criticism of social research, nowadays undertaken by American scholars in Thailand in behalf of American warfare in Southeast Asia, it seems meaningful to dig into our own colonial past. As a matter of fact, throughout the colonial era cultural anthropologists - at that time usually called ethnologists - generally had no qualms about offering their services to their colonial governments. The difference with those civil servants who, though being part of the colonial apparatus, had some spare time and energy left for publishing their findings in journals or books as amateur researchers, was not very great. Maybe the ethnologists were somewhat more independent, and had more possibilities than members of the civil service to mix with the people in an intimate way. Even those among the ethnologists, who were in the service of a colonial government, were somewhat more independent vis-a-vis their principals than a civil servant who was part of the administrative hierarchy. This circumstance offered them more chances to influence the governmental policies towards the people in a humanitarian sense.

Yet, we may assume that loyalty vis-a-vis the colonial government on which, when it came to the test, they had to depend, in general got the better of their sense of solidarity with the people among whom they lived.

2 — The case of the famous student of Islam, C. Snouck Hurgronje, illustrates the way scholars of repute put their research at the service of a colonial government as a matter of course even in situations where this amounted to lending a hand in suppressing rebellious movements. He played an active role in the Aceh war, which was very costly not only in terms of money but of human lives.

Through his whole demeanour, his sharp pen, his haughty criticism of numerous lesser gods who had dared to write on matters in which he was an acknowledged expert — but equally through his 'ethical' views on colonial policies, Snouck became a highly controversial figure in Dutch colonial circles. With Professor C. van Vollenhoven he was considered to be a typical representative of the school of Leiden which, in particular after the end of the First World War, in Dutch colonial circles was decried, among business people and retired old India hands, as 'soft'.²

¹ See J. A. A. van Doorn and W. J. Hendrix, *Ontsporing van geweld: Over het Nederlands Indisch - Indonesisch conflict*, 1970.

What strikes us is that Snouck Hurgronje, during his lifetime, was hardly attacked by progressive Dutchmen who could have reproached him that, through his recommendations, he had helped suppress the Achenese.³ Only in postwar, independent, Indonesia this reproach has been heard, for example when a prominent Moslem leader called him 'the mufti of Dutch imperialism'.⁴ Both 'ethical' and 'imperialistic'? Recently a Dutch journalist, Paul van 't Veer, has argued that, far from being contradictory, these concepts present two aspects of the same phenomenon.⁵

Snouck Hurgronje was convinced that, by his recommendations regarding the warfare against the Achenese, he not only served our interest, but theirs as well.

This is why a more detailed study of Snouck Hurgronje's case is so instructive for a deeper insight into the contemporary 'counter-insurgency' issue.

3 — Through Snouck's legendary stay in Mecca, under the name Abd al-Ghaffar, some people may have got the impression that he had collected his Acheh materials in a similar way, without his identity having become known among the Achenese. This has not been the case; however, it is typical of Snouck's mentality that he would not have had any qualms about presenting himself to the Achenese under false colours. As a matter of fact, he himself proposed to the government to play for a second time the role of Abd al-Ghaffar and to go directly, via Penang, to Acheh, that is to say to those parts of Acheh which were not occupied by the Dutch.⁶ That the plan with which both Buitenzorg (the seat of the Governor-general) and The Hague had already agreed, failed to materialize, was not of his own making. When he had reached Penang, it appeared that the governor of Acheh objected to the plan. Snouck pursued his journey to Batavia, and from then onwards evidently there could be no question any more of going incognito to the Acheh uplands; the notorious *kabar angin* (floating rumour) of Indonesia would certainly have reached Acheh in advance of his arrival.

² Harry J. Benda has tried to show in *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese occupation*, 1958, that far from forming a unity, the Leiden school showed a rift, Snouck and Van Vollenhoven holding opposite views on essential issues of policy towards Islam.

³ See, however, S. J. Rutgers and A. Huber, *Indonesië*, 1937, pp. 149-150.

⁴ See B. J. Boland, *The Struggle of Islam in modern Indonesia*, 1971, p. 13, referring to Isa Anshary.

⁵ Paul van 't Veer, *De Atjeh-oorlog*, 1969, pp. 228 ff.; from the same author: 'De machthebbers van Indië', in *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, Vol. 86 (1971), in a special issue on modern imperialism and Dutch expansion in Indonesia, pp. 45-46.

⁶ A. J. P. Moereels, *Chr. Snouck Hurgronje*, 1938, p. 28.

In May 1889, after he had arrived in Batavia, Snouck entered the governmental service as an unattached official especially entrusted with the study of Islam in Java. He was expected in the first place to investigate the role of Islam in the recent insurrection in Bantam. This serious uprising had erupted in 1888 in Tjilegon, and had been suppressed within a rather short lapse of time.⁷

Such an appointment to investigate the causes of an insurgency, which has already been extinguished, does not yet involve an ethnologist in what one should call 'counter-insurgency research'. One could imagine that the aim of the mission is solely to acquire insight into the deeper causes of such an insurrection, in order to enable the governments to design a better policy for the future which could eliminate the roots of discontent. A similar assignment has been extended, after a revolt in Menangkabau, erupted in 1927, had failed, to a committee headed by the sociologist B. J. O. Schrieke, at that time professor at the Law School of Batavia.⁸

However, after a lapse of two years he did become involved in the Aceh war which was going on and on. In 1891 he declined a chair in Leiden and accepted from the colonial government a permanent appointment as 'Adviser for Eastern Languages and Muhammedan Law'. The authorities in Aceh had dropped their opposition to his coming, and so the learned outsider got the opportunity to acquaint himself with Achenese society, at least within the confines of the 'Concentration Line' meticulously observed by general Deijkerhoff. We should not forget, however, that when in Mecca Snouck had already come to know quite a number of Achenese.

A quickly acquired mastery of the Achenese language, a noting down of customs and institutions, a profound study of Islam in its manifold aspects — all such purely scholarly activities can hardly meet with any objections, the less so if one views them within the perspective of those times. The *magnum opus* resulting from his stay in Aceh, which appeared in Dutch in 1893-94 and was later on also published in English translation⁹, is justly still counted among the classics of colonial ethnology.

Our questions only arise insofar as Snouck, in accordance with his official assignment, adds policy recommendations to his research report. These recommendations refer to the best way to pursue the Aceh war. It is this aspect

⁷ See Sartono Kartodirdjo, *The Peasants' Revolt of Banten in 1888: its Conditions, Course and Sequel*, 1966.

⁸ *Selected Writings of B. Schrieke, Indonesian Sociological Studies: Part One*, 1955, pp. 83-166; the full text of the report, including the secret part of it, has been published equally in English translation, in Harry J. Benda and Ruth T. McVey (eds.), *The Communist Uprisings of 1926—1927 in Indonesia: Key Documents*, 1960.

⁹ C. Snouck Hurgronje, *De Atjehers*, 2 vols., 1893-94; same author, *The Achenese*, 1906.

which unmistakably turns his Aceh report into a piece of 'counter-insurgency research'.

Formally there is little to blame in his activity as a political adviser. Snouck was no longer connected with any scientific institute in the Netherlands. His official function was to be an adviser in the service of the colonial government. If we want to express a moral judgment, we can only base ourselves on the contents of his recommendations, against the background of the character of his personal contacts with the Achenese people and of the information acquired from them.

4 — Snouck's policy recommendations in connection with the Aceh war have been published some time ago in a three volume collection of documents on his activities as an official adviser.¹⁰ By a 'very secret missive' of May 23, 1892, the Adviser for Eastern Languages and Muhammedan Law presented his 'Aceh report' to the Governor-general. The first and second part of the report have been reedited, with official permission, into the two volume publication *De Atjehers*. But the third and fourth part containing a discussion of the war, and policy recommendations, have for over half a century remained 'very secret'. Yet, they were not secret to the point that nothing of it transpired into the open; in the colony secrets were never kept for a very long time. Through 'a thoughtless query' of a retired official from the Indies and Snouck's reaction thereupon in 1899 a tip of the veil was lifted.¹¹ But a clearer picture of Snouck's procedure and of the spirit in which he had conceived his task at the time could not be obtained until the *Ambtelijke adviezen* had been posthumously published.

In the introduction to his report Snouck wrote, that throughout his stay of over six months in Aceh he had 'exclusively associated with the native population'. 'Practically all his information had been obtained through his mixing with the people'. Often he had the opportunity to meet 'chiefs and people hailing lower class from the coasts, as well as from the uplands of Great Aceh, who lived outside the Concentration Line'.

In a later memoir he describes his procedure in the following way: 'Since many years I daily associate with Natives regardless of their position, in a more intimate way than could be the case with a Civil Servant, considering his official position. In order to achieve such an intimacy one has, so to say, to absorb oneself within the native society, and to have at one's disposal the

¹⁰ E. Gobée and C. Adriaanse, *Ambtelijke Adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje*; see more in particular Vol. 1 (1957), pp. 47-97.

¹¹ C. Snouck Hurgronje, 'Een onbezonnen vraag', see his *Verspreide Geschriften*, Vol. 4 I (1924), pp. 369 ff. The retired official was R. A. van Sandick. His original article, titled 'The following query to Dr. Snouck Hurgronje', had been published in the daily *Locomotief*. The latter's reply was originally published in the *Java-bode*.

instruments which may eliminate, as far as possible, the barriers that separate the native world from ours due to the difference in language, customs, way of thinking and race'.

Thus far it is an excellent summary of the required attitude of a cultural anthropologist. But at the same time it clearly indicates that Snouck Hurgronje did not present himself to the Achenese as part of the Establishment, but as their friend.

And now we have to consider Snouck's policy recommendations. These evidently refer, in the first place, to the *military* field. Through the 'thoughtless query' of 1899 and Snouck's reply it has transpired that Snouck had recommended to stop the passive confinement within the 'Concentration Line', to adopt an active type of warfare and to chase the religious leaders belonging to the hostile *ulama* party unto the remotest corners of the interior. On the other hand, the feudal chiefs should be held in esteem, and it should be attempted to induce them to accept the authority of the Dutch. Only in this way could in the long run a situation be created which would guarantee a permanent exercise of authority.

In the 'very secret' report this argument is being clearly expounded: 'The true active enemies are the *ulamas* and adventurers who have organized the bands which, although not numerous, still can time and again be supplemented from various layers of the population. To these one should add part of the settled population and some chiefs. With this hostile party there is no point in negotiating, since their doctrine and their selfinterest cause them not to bend unless to the use of force. A *conditio sine qua non* for a restoration of order in Great Acheh is to crush them heavily, in order to keep the Achenese people through the inspiration of fear from joining the band leaders, since this then would become dangerous'.¹²

Unmistakably Snouck, therefore, chooses sides and fully identifies himself with the colonial authorities. He is, moreover, not very fastidious as far as the choice of means is concerned: 'The execution of the plan should be prepared, I think, by an efficacious and systematical espionage of Teungkoe Kutakarang's¹³ bands, and a certain initial success should be ensured. Although I am not competent to go into details of the matter, I certainly dare maintain that such an espionage is possible'. Did he view his scientific research in the field as a first phase in this 'espionage'?

This is the imperialist side of Snouck's recommendations.

5 — His ultimate aim, however, had 'ethical' connotations. He opines that beating the *ulama* party is a pre-condition for a welfare policy in a somewhat

¹² Gobée and Adriaanse, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹³ The main leader of the *ulama* party in 1892.

more remote future. 'We cannot expect any benefit from our passive allies, the hereditary chiefs and the *kampong* dwellers who, most of all, crave for security and welfare, until a number of blows inflicted upon those gangs has restored the deeply shaken confidence in the *Kompeuni's** power'. In order to achieve this, the colonial military power should keep occupying a number of strategic bases in the interior of Aceh for a considerable period.

The promotion of welfare should already be tackled pending the military operations. Meanwhile, 'all what is possible should be done to restore, among the hereditary chiefs and the people, the no less deeply shattered confidence in the *salutary intentions* of the *Kompeuni*. To this end agriculture, industry and trade should be promoted'.

As regards the demeanour of the Dutch authorities in addressing the chiefs and the population, Snouck recommends 'a polite and dignified manner', instead of abusing them and calling them 'scamps' or 'skunks'.

And when, many years later, Snouck is asked to assess the suitability of Major G. C. E. van Daalen for the function of Governor of Aceh, he mentions as the main objection — as against a number of positive qualities — that the latter has 'a deeply rooted contempt for anybody who is a Native'.

But when we ask ourselves whether Snouck's harsh policy recommendations could not basically be attributed to his sympathy with the people among whom he had lived, it gives us a shock to read the following judgment on the Achenese: 'that Aceh, with its hopeless internal discord, its lack of any central authority, its deeply rooted contempt for kafirs (unbelievers), *the treacherous and utterly unreliable character of its population*, cannot be won over for a civilized intercourse, nay, *cannot be made harmless unless through a complete submission* (italics are mine. W.)'¹⁴ In this judgment imperialism unmistakably gets the upper hand over ethical considerations!

Snouck, after his first Aceh expedition, for many more years kept advising the Indies government in its warfare. His policy recommendations were not merely a casual byproduct of a scientific study. In the first instance, his advice was not followed: General Deijkerhoff felt safe behind the 'Concentration Line'. It was only after the 'treason', in 1896, of Teuku Umar who had been treated by Deijkerhoff as an ally and lavishly provided with arms — that Snouck got the chance to let his views prevail.¹⁵

Upon his advice a daredevil, the officer Van Heutz was appointed a governor of Aceh, and Snouck joined him in Aceh, to assist him actively in his new

* The term used in Aceh for the government.

¹⁴ Gobée and Adriaanse, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that it was Snouck himself who, in the first instance, had suggested Teuku Umar as an adventurer with whom deals could be made. In later years Snouck had repeatedly warned against him, but in vain. See Gobée and Adriaanse, *op. cit.*, p. 95, footnote.

capacity as Adviser for Native Affairs in his counter-guerilla. In the process, the special military police corps kept chasing the leaders of the *ulama* party, in accordance with Snouck's recipe, unto the remotest corners.¹⁶

In the execution of this policy Snouck kept advocating moderation. His exhortations to stop the so-called method of the 'red cock' (burning *kampongs* down), customary in the colonial army, found response with Van Heutsz. But basically he till the end kept offering his knowledge of Achenese society to be put at the service of military submission.

6 — Did Snouck ever doubt the moral justification of his line of action?¹⁷ It does not seem likely. He was not the type of man ever to admit that he could have made mistakes. The Dutch journalist, Paul van 't Veer, observes that the title of Snouck's memoir, in which he gives an account of his activities from 1889 till autumn 1903, could have carried the title: *I am always right*. He maintained that he was also right vis-a-vis Van Heutz, serious disagreements with whom in the meantime had arisen, which was what one could have expected.¹⁸

History did not put Snouck in the right. That is to say, he definitely was right as far as the way to submit Aceh militarily was concerned. But he has not been borne out in his expectation that afterwards Aceh could be led towards welfare by a colonial government. Van 't Veer has, making use of a report written by the Islamologist R. A. Kern in 1921,¹⁹ pointedly indicated the weakness of Snouck's conception²⁰. In fact, Snouck has staked everything on the feudal chiefs, the *uleebalangs*; and in so doing he has perpetuated a social system which was deadening for any initiative from below. Snouck did not understand that the *ulamas* whom he fought so fiercely, represented the dynamic forces inside Achenese society.²¹ He also did not realize that fighting the

¹⁶ Van der Maaten, who wrote a lengthy biography of Snouck Hurgronje, argues that the ultimate victory of the Dutch in the Aceh war should, to a very large extent, be attributed to Snouck's recommendations; K. van der Maaten, *Snouck Hurgronje en de Atjehoorlog*, 2 vols., 1948.

¹⁷ Rutgers and Huber, *op. cit.*, p. 150, suggest that this was the case, but their arguments are far from convincing.

¹⁸ The conflict has been discussed in J. W. Naarding, *Het conflict Snouck Hurgronje — Van Heutsz — Van Daalen: Een onderzoek naar de verantwoordelijkheid*, 1938; a series of articles by H. T. Damsté, 'Drie Atjeh-mannen: Snouck Hurgronje - Van Heutsz - Van Daalen', in *Koloniaal Tijdschrift*, 1936/1938; K. van der Maaten, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ The report, numbering 56 pages and dated 16 december 1921, is titled *Onderzoek Atjeh-moorden*, and is to be found in Tichelman's Collection at the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology in Leiden.

²⁰ P. van 't Veer, *De Atjeh-oorlog*, *op. cit.*, pp. 296 ff.

²¹ W.F. Wertheim, 'De Indonesische samenleving aan de vooravond van de imperialistische expansie: configuraties en stromingen', *Bijdragen en mededelingen betref-*

ulama party amounted to fighting the majority of the Achenese people. Maybe he would have realized it better, if he had been less haughty, and if he would have felt some true sympathy for the Achenese people. But in that case, Snouck would not have remained himself.

7 — Inhowfar is the case of Snouck's study of Aceh instructive for those who are concerned with the issue of the 'Counter-insurgency research', financed and organized by Americans in Southeast Asia and Latin America? Snouck's reputation has, during his lifetime and for a long period afterwards, hardly suffered from the fact that he put his scholarly work at the service of what he saw as a correct Dutch national policy. On the contrary he has won, in scholarly circles, a great fame through his studies. It is the posterity which starts asking questions — although there is a story that Raden Sosrokartono, brother of the much revered Raden Adjeng Kartini and, like his sister, a very independent mind, once had reproached him: 'Mister Snouck, in fact you have betrayed my people'.

Is all this a reason to condone the prostitution of science committed by Americans on a much larger scale in the service of what they view as *their* national interest? Not in the least. Nor are the American atrocities and acts of terror in Southeast Asia in the least excused by our awareness that our Dutch military have committed quite a number of excesses and brutalities during the 'Police Actions'. The case of Snouck Hurgronje only shows that the norms of a past colonial era are no longer valid and cannot be upheld any more.²²

The 'hardware' of warfare has become so incomparably more gruesome and destructive since the times of Van Heutsz, that the social researcher with his 'software' can no longer escape explicitly asking the question of the moral justification of what he is doing.

Equally the times are past when Westerners could with impunity imagine, in their racial conceit, to be entitled to patronize the suppressed peoples with their 'ethical' good intentions, which amounted to humiliating them deeply.

An 'ethical' attempt to justify the war in Southeast Asia through dressing it up with pretty-sounding welfare plans such as the big Mekong-project, no longer does the trick, like in Snouck's times. The days of 'naive anthropology' are definitely a thing of the past.

According to the norms of to-day we have no right at all to force upon the

Jende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden, Vol. 86 (1971), issue on Dutch imperialism in Indonesia, pp. 24 ff.; in this paper the author also criticizes J. Siegel, *The Rope of God*, 1969, who heavily relied on Snouck Hurgronje in his analysis of early Achenese society.

²² See, for example, L. Ch. Schenk-Sandbergen, 'Sociaal-wetenschappelijk onderzoek in Zuidoost Azië in dienst van de Amerikaanse regering', *Wetenschap en Samenleving*, Vol. 25 (1971), pp. 107-108.

oppressed peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America what in our view is good for them. They are entitled to determine their own fate. In the new professional code for social researchers we cannot content ourselves with satisfying strictly scientific norms, in combination with a code of behaviour acknowledging the formal right of the researcher to put his knowledge at the service of any given government, albeit his own. The researcher will have to ask himself not only which government, but also which cause he serves with his research.

In the world of 1972 the social researcher has to mind a more basic mission: solidarity with the wretched of the earth.

If measured with *this* norm, Snouck Hurgronje has violated the confidence of the Achenese, that he had succeeded in winning by his suave demeanour. In violating their confidence he showed that, basically, he considered them as enemies. And if the Achenese were 'treacherous' vis-a-vis the Dutch masters, this was exclusively due to the fact that they viewed them, in their turn, as enemies.

But if this is true, Snouck Hurgronje was evidently the last man who had the right to call the Achenese treacherous.