
THE CURSE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH: ATJEH, 1901

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When I was in Aceh,¹ the province of Indonesia on the northern tip of Sumatra, in 2000, I was not surprised to find nearly every Acehnese I met strongly against the government. Most people supported the free Aceh movement, which meant they wanted to secede from Indonesia. They claimed an Acehnese identity in the face of the depredations of the Indonesian army that for decades has killed, raped, and robbed throughout the province. I was all the more surprised, then, when I heard so few references to the Acehnese War, as the Dutch spoke of it. From the time of the Dutch invasion of the Sultanate of Aceh, Acehnese conducted a fierce resistance lasting about forty years. It is not easy to establish a new identity even when it claims to be grounded in an old one. Why, then, more references were not made to the war, and why, in particular, nothing like the jihad that was waged against the Dutch is being waged now—this despite the examples from other places in the Muslim world—this interested me. One cannot treat an absence directly. Looking again at photographs of the war made by the Dutch, I asked myself about the place of photography throughout the conflict, hoping that this necessarily oblique approach might suggest an answer to my questions.

Photography came early to the Indies, in particular to Java. As elsewhere in the world, it arrived in the wake of a tradition of pictorial representation which, according to Liane van der Linden, reduced the strangeness of the island and its population.² There were two aims of this form of representation: to show the place as it was and to be aesthetically pleasing. When photography began, it furthered this double aim. The

¹ I use the Dutch spelling, "Atjeh," to refer to the sultanate. The contemporary Indonesian spelling is "Aceh," and I use that to refer to the province of Indonesia. The followers of the Acehnese independence movement often use English orthography, spelling the name "Acheh."

² Liane van der Linden, "Inleiding" [Introduction] to Anneke Groeneveld, *Toekang Portret: 100 Jaar Fotografie in Nederlands Indie 1839-1939* (Amsterdam: Fragment Uitgeverij, n.d.), pp. 8-13.

first major use of photography by the state was in archeology. Under the influence of the Napoleonic inventory of Egypt and for the sake of the prestige of the Netherlands, the government wanted to show the great temples of Java, particularly the Borobudur. The drawings that had been commissioned for this purpose were thought to fail. They "were not considered suitable for scientific study, nor did they do justice to the artistic value of the Borobodoer."³ The governor-general gave the task of photographing the monument to a photographer, Isidore van Kinsbergen, who had maintained a studio in Batavia since about 1860. There was little general interest in these pictures.⁴ Yet at least from an artistic point of view, they were a success, inspiring Gauguin, for instance.⁵ The double interest in scientific recording and in aesthetic rendering continued as the photographic inventory became one element in the general recording and, some say, invention of Javanese culture by the Dutch.⁶

Van Kinsbergen taught his photographic skills to a man named Kassian Céphas, who became the first Javanese photographer. Another story has it that it was not Van Kinsbergen, but another Dutchman, Simon Willem Camerik, who taught Céphas. Whatever the case, Céphas apparently learned photography from one European or another between 1861 and 1871.⁷ He was subsequently hired by the archeological service to photograph many important monuments, including the Borobudur. In that case, he was a success in the first aim, "to show the place as it was," but there was controversy about his degree of success in the second. Some notable Dutch authorities at the time felt that his photographs lacked the modeling that would show the beauty of the temples. They felt that his pictures were too stiff. Not everyone agreed with this assessment; the Jogjanese court retained him to photograph its members and to record its ceremonies. The controversy continues into the present. The French historian Claude Guillot said of Céphas's pictures: "With rare exceptions, all life seems to have disappeared. Nothing indicates a trait of character: there is no overall plan; all the portraits are taken standing, face forward, stiffly posed, under equal light. Images of dignity and not images of individuals."⁸ He was answered by a Javanese, Yudhi Soeryoatmodjo, who argued that the images were not supposed to represent character, and that faulting them for its absence would be a judgment foreign to the time and place. They were meant to show dignity. It is not a question of technical ability. The pictures show what the sitters intended, which was not "the individual characters," but what surrounded them: their regalia, the batik they wore, the positions of their hands, "all of which represented the tradition and identity of the Yogyakarta court."

³ Groeneveld, *Toekang Portret*, pp. 17-18 (quote, p. 18).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20

⁵ Jan Fontein, "Kassian Céphas: A Pioneer of Indonesian Photography," in *Towards Independence: A Century of Indonesia Photographed*, ed. Jane Levy Reed (San Francisco, CA: Friends of Photography, 1991), p. 47.

⁶ For a recent development of the idea of Java defeated by the Dutch and turned into an object of Dutch study, see Tsuchiya Kenji, "Javanology and the Age of Ronggowarsita: An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Javanese Culture," in *Reading Southeast Asia*, ed. Takashi Shiraishi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1990). For the Javanese response to this effort, see John Pemberton, *On the Subject of "Java"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), Chapter Two.

⁷ The second story is included in the Introduction to Céphas, *Yogyakarta: Photography in the Service of the Sultan* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1999), p. 7. There is some dispute about whether Céphas was of mixed ancestry or not. Guillot seems persuasive in arguing that he was not. Claude Guillot, "Un exemple d'assimilation à Java: Le photographe Kassian Céphas (1844-1912)," *Archipel* 22 (1982): 55-73.

⁸ Claude Guillot, "Un exemple d'assimilation à Java."

These critics agree about the character of the photographs, but they disagree about their value. I say this in order to show that there was little problem in adopting photography in Java. The very mechanical quality of the camera may have enabled it to show what Javanese wanted it to show.

In any case, the most important achievement of the camera—memorialization—was precisely what all parties wanted. As the Dutchman, J. Groneman, said in the preface to a volume of Céphas's pictures of court ceremonies, "One day this shall belong to the history of the past. May then this book preserve the memory and manifold remarkable imagery of it."⁹ That is exactly what happened. And that is because there was an accord of ideas about the aims of photography between the Dutch who taught Céphas, thus indirectly establishing a line of Javanese photographers after him, and the Javanese consumers of his pictures. The disagreement between some Europeans (not including Gauguin, for instance, who used his pictures) and the Javanese only shows how photography suited Javanese aims and even their tastes.

All this sounds unexceptional, but the compatibility of photography with the cultures of the archipelago should not be taken for granted because it was not adopted elsewhere in the Indies. I will now turn to one area where it found no place in local culture. My point, in fact, is to say why, when the camera, as an instrument of memorialization, ought to have been quickly adopted (providing always that there are no myths about its technology, as there apparently weren't in the case I will discuss), it was not. I hope thereby to say something further about the place of the camera generally.

To do so I will turn to the story of another photographer, this time Dutch, from a few decades later, but from quite a different place. In 1873 the Dutch invaded the Sultanate of Atjeh. Dutch ships anchored off the coast near the seat of the sultanate and landed their troops. The Dutch forces had only poor maps and guides. They got lost repeatedly during their first foray. They found themselves surrounded and attacked by Atjehnese snipers whom they could not see. They managed to get to the palace grounds and burned down the palace, only to find they had actually destroyed the mosque. General Kohler, in charge of the expedition, standing under a nearby tree, was killed by a sniper. The Dutch forces retreated and did not return until the next year. When they came back, they brought photographers with them, members of the Topographical Service, whose job it was to help in gaining knowledge of the terrain, but who also photographed the troops and the areas where they were found, as well as Dutch fortifications and, eventually, the results of Dutch victories.¹⁰ Unlike in Java, then, photography in Atjeh was not a tool for the preservation of a culture, but a technological device devoted to its defeat and to the recording of the remnants of that defeat.

⁹ J. Groneman, *De Garebeg's te Ngajogyakarta met photogrammen van Céphas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1895), p. 3.

¹⁰ A selection of these pictures can be found in Louis Zweers, *Sumatra: Kolonialen, Koelies, en Krijgers: Met vele unieke foto's* (Houten: Fibula, 1988), from which I also draw the information noted above concerning the Topographical Service. See pp. 38ff. For a description of the encirclement of the Dutch troops, see E. B. Kielstra, *Beschrijving van den Atjeh-Oorlog met gebruikmaking der officiële Bronnen, door het Departement van Koloniën daartoe afgestaan* (The Hague: De Gebroeders van Cleef, 1883), pp. 1-97.

The Topographical Service pictures reproduced in the book of Louis Zweers are not those used for the preparation of maps, however. They show the inside of Dutch forts, the position of the cannon, the cannoneers with them, the mortars and their accompanying soldiers, poised to shoot. They also show a team in charge of provisions positioned next to their supplies and warehouses and sailors in ranks on board their ships. These photos associate people and things: soldiers with their tools. They show installations new to the sultanate. They show the occupation of Atjeh, insofar as it had progressed, but more than that, they show the Dutch in the process of inhabiting the sultanate. These men belong in the landscape, in the first place because they have wrenched the land away from its inhabitants. There are pictures of soldiers at ease, in half dress, comfortable in their surroundings. They are in Atjeh, but the gap between Atjehnese and Dutch was surely greatly widened by the prevailing hostility between them. The Dutch did not drive the population out of the capital, which they named Kota Radja, City of the King, but they had little to do with them. Given the hostility of the Acehnese toward the invaders, the pictures of Dutch soldiers in Atjeh reflected back to them their presence in the sultanate in the absence of the usual reflection one gets from the glances one exchanges with local inhabitants, whether we are at home or in a foreign place. The lack of reassurance furnished by mutual looks was compensated for through the mediation of photography.

The Atjehnese War lasted perhaps forty years or more. No one is certain when war turned into a resistance movement sustained by small bands of guerrillas and individuals. Several times this conflict was declared over, only not to be. After Dutch forces took the palace in 1874, they thought they had won, but it was still more than twenty years before the large valley around the capital was cleared of resistance forces. At that point, in 1898, Dutch forces moved to Pidie, an area of the sultanate on the East Coast. Their success there again led to announcements of the end of the war, but again this was not the case, and no one dates the end of that conflict before 1914. In 1901, General van Heutsz, the Civil and Military Governor of Atjeh and later governor-general of the Indies, who, along with Christian Snouck Hurgronje, is given credit for the policy that eventually led to the ending of the war, moved to the next important site of resistance, Samalanga, in Pidie. By this time, the influence of Atjehnese *ulama* had risen considerably, and the doctrine of the holy war was widely influential.

"Atjehnese will never be defeated except by force, and then only someone who shows himself to possess power [*macht*] to make his will respected shall be the master whose orders they will obey." This sentence of General van Heutsz, widely quoted, is repeated in the introduction, pseudonymously signed, to a book written by a commercial photographer, C. Nieuwenhuis. Van Heutsz invited Nieuwenhuis to join his troops in their expedition to Samalanga to record it. The writer of the introduction notes that popular interest in the war in Holland waxed and waned, depending on major events. Much took place during what he thought was the final stage of pacification, a stage that he believed the Dutch public should be aware of and yet was apparently ignoring. He hoped that the photographs would arouse interest and thus support for the war. In point of fact, the brutality of van Heutsz, of a sort repeated later on a larger scale by General van Daalen and carried out prior to his campaign in the clearing of the Atjeh valley, aroused indignation in Holland. The book reports the burning of villages, for instance, and there is a photo showing victorious KNIL (the acronym for Royal Netherlands Indies Army) troops staring down onto an Atjehnese

fortification they had just defeated.¹¹ Atjehnese corpses are scattered over the earth. This photograph became the model for others taken later, as photographers fulfilled van Heutsz's goal of recording Dutch victories. Other photographs, showing Atjehnese women among the corpses, with only babies left as survivors, are even more difficult to look at.¹²

Nieuwenhuis was not self-conscious about his work. He says of himself that, thanks to the good offices of a certain Lt. Col. Van der Wedden, van Heutsz, the Civil and Military Governor of Atjeh and Dependences, allowed him to be "a witness to the foremost events of the Samalanga campaign."¹³ He wrote a short account of the expedition, rather than an account of how he took his pictures, though he sometimes includes such information incidentally. He lists the participants in the march through the forest to the series of Atjehnese fortifications and describes the difficult conditions they encounter. His photographs are illustrations; he could well have written the book without including them, since one can comprehend his perceptions of the course of the expedition without them. He reports that he was the first photographer to be invited on such a military expedition in the history of the KNIL. His account shows him to be a nonsoldier who was much impressed by Lt. General van Heutsz and by the prowess of his soldiers. It was probably that admiration that gave Nieuwenhuis the courage to make the horrifying photograph he did of the Atjehnese victims of this aggression.

Events that took place before the scene of the final battle he records without much feeling. For instance, at one point the artillery destroyed an Atjehnese fortification. When Dutch troops reach a nearby village, they discover the inhabitants had fled when the fortification was destroyed. "The warships off the coast thus got the chance to successfully harass the refugees with their salvos."¹⁴ The initial plates in the volume have captions such as "Panorama of Meuredoe," a place on the coast; "Naval artillery, 10.5 cm, on Glé Nang Roë," Glé Nang Roë being the mountain where fighting began; "Bivak Nang Roë," showing about two dozen soldiers posed in a group before an Atjehnese house where they apparently put up. And so on. But Nieuwenhuis also continues to use the camera to show things never before registered on film and to create a record to be used later, as photographers in Atjeh did before him. He describes, for instance, how in certain places there is practically no trail at all. "At 10:30am the head column reached Oeloë Oë; the artillery left the path and tried to find a better way to Gampong Ankieëng. But this path too was scarcely passable ..." ¹⁵ The

¹¹ The photograph is that on page p. 29, captioned "Foto Genomen in de Nog Brandende Versterkking Batëë Ilië" (Photo taken in the still burning fortification of Batëë Ilië). See C. Nieuwenhuis, *Expeditie naar Samalanga: Dagverhaal van een Fotograaf te velde* (Amsterdam: Van Holkema & Warendorf, n.d.).

¹² See the photograph by H. M. Neeb, "Gezicht in de kampong Lahat, na de inname door de marechaussee onder leiding van Van Daalen" (View of Lahat Village after its capture by *marechaussee* [special forces] under the leadership of Van Daalen), republished in Zweers, *Sumatra*, p. 57, as well as another entitled "In de veroverde benteng Koeto Reh, tijdens den tocht onder van Daalen door het Gajoland, op 14 Juni 1904; er bleven 561 gesneuvde Gajoes liggen. Bij een in leven gebleven kind staat een schildwacht. Links bove, staande, donkere figuur: Van Daalen" (In the captured fort of Koeta Reh during the expedition of Van Daalen, 14 June, 1904; 561 slain Gajos lay there. A sentry stands next to a still living child. Above left, standing, dark figure, Van Daalen). The picture is reproduced with this caption in H. C. Zentgraaff, *Atjeh* (Batavia: Koninklijke Drukkerij de Unie, n.d. [193x]), p. 190.

¹³ C. Nieuwenhuis, *Expeditie naar Samalanga*, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

way is rough, and it takes a full day to march ten kilometers. At this point, the author inserts a photograph of the troops wading across a river for lack of a bridge. When a bridge does appear in the photographs, it is an Atjehnese bridge, a series of bamboo poles set in a line over a swamp, with another such series raised above it to be used as a railing. The soldiers balance their way across, but several seem to have fallen in the water.¹⁶

When the Dutch forces finally reach the enemy positions they have sought, Nieuwenhuis takes pictures of the approach to the battle. The line advances, and he follows. But when the fiercest fighting ensues, he is unable to photograph it.

A fearfully obstinate fight now began of which I, alas, took no picture. My servants and the coolies who carried the apparatus were nowhere to be found; frightened by the rattling gun fire, they had run to safety in a sheltered place, and only with great difficulty, after the first storming, could I get my camera "in position."¹⁷

He does, however, picture the troops storming through a thorny bamboo barrier, up a hill to an Atjehnese fortification.¹⁸

Having missed most of the close fighting, Nieuwenhuis nonetheless is able to capture a picture of the immediate aftermath. This picture, "Photo showing the still burning fortification of Batéë Ilië'," shows Dutch troops looking down over the palisades onto Atjehnese corpses strewn over most of the ground.¹⁹ There is still smoke rising from the firing of weapons, and this obscures a great deal. Nieuwenhuis has added numbers and plus signs, which identify: "1. Lance 2. Blunderbus 3. Grenade launcher 4. Oven 5. Rice Sack. ++++ Bodies of Atjehnese."

The taking of the fortress entailed fierce hand-to-hand fighting. The defenders would not surrender. The Dutch troops (which is to say Dutch officers, whose soldiers were largely Ambonese and some Africans) pressed on over the top of the fortress and fought inside. Nieuwenhuis describes the battle:

There now began a terrible fight, man against man. The enemy defended himself heroically, that has to be recognized, and they chose to the last man to die with *klewangs* [Atjehnese short swords] in their fists rather than surrender. The dreadful drama became more terrifying at each moment through the bursting of powder mines which, no matter how badly laid, the enemy now and then succeeded in exploding.²⁰

Nieuwenhuis sees this event "close up." Still, it is a synoptic picture he offers us, obviously made afterwards ("they chose to the last man ... ") from the point of view of an observer who saw it all, unobstructed by smoke or other obstacles to vision. It pictures the conflict as a conflict, i.e., not as the sense impressions of someone who,

¹⁶ Ibid., plate 12, "Atjehsche Brug door de Rawa (moeras) bij den Glé Risa Boengang" (Atjehnese Bridge over the swamp near Glé Risa Boengang), p. 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

¹⁸ Ibid., plate 18, p. 28. "Versperringen van bamboe doeri (stekelige bamboe)" (Thorny Bamboo Obstruction).

¹⁹ Ibid., plate 19, p. 29.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

“up close,” cannot impose a structure on the confusing impressions that reach him. Furthermore, he does not fail to recognize the courage of “the enemy.”

Also the Atjehnese had a brave van Speyk in their midst who, still even then, before he could be bayoneted, found a way to stick a fuse in a big powder vat.

I have seen this brave man, old and wrinkled, and, regardless of the wounds to our side caused by the explosion, I felt respect for the gray hero, who, rather than surrender, blew himself up with friend and foe.²¹

Nieuwenhuis thus remained clear about who was who, what qualities counted, and what happened. If he missed photographing all this, it was only because his bearers had run off. He apologizes. But there is nothing he describes which, it is implied, in theory the camera could not capture.

After describing the battle he sums up his impressions:

Whoever as a civilian and a peaceful citizen has seen the dreadfulness of such a battle close up shall never forget it. When our troops were positioned for the storming of Batéë Ilië, the fire power of the Atjehnese from Batéë Ilië as well as from Asam Koembang was deafening. The fort was covered and surrounded with heavy powder smoke. Then, the assault; the wild hurrah of the attackers, once or at most twice, followed by the prolonged and penetrating battle cry of the Atjehnese, Allah il Allah, swept away by fanaticism into uncontrollable madness. In addition to this appalling turmoil of fighting and hellish noise, the sound of some shots, the clank of *klewangs*, steel on steel, then again a raw shriek; we can only guess whether it is the death cry of a friend or an enemy. From time to time there is a red flash which for an instant interrupts the powerful rays of the sun immediately followed by somber, dull thuds of explosions of powder which again and again make clouds of powder smoke rise up, finally the noise quiets down for a moment and then come the yells of the victors, Batéë Ilië has fallen.²²

Here, battle as conflict is replaced by battle as confusion; often one cannot tell who is on which side. The explosions of light—brighter than sunlight—and sound overwhelm the senses. The picture of events changes, I believe, when, in the midst of his synoptic account, Nieuwenhuis remarks that he has seen the wrinkled old man just moments before he blows himself up “with friend and foe.” He remarks on a detail of the man’s features—his wrinkles—introducing a singular perception into an otherwise formulated account. This detail is associated with death, as though what he has seen and what happened are conjoined, but in an incomprehensible way.

This, indeed, is how we often think of the sublime. It occurs at moments when we have had a narrow escape from danger. Afterwards, we feel once again in charge of our cognitive powers. Before this recovery, “we flee from the sight of an object that scares us,” Kant says.²³ Overwhelmed by a danger we cannot cognize, our cognitive facilities are exhausted, and we are faced nonetheless with something we cannot take in. At those moments, Kant adds, we experience “a momentary checking of our vital

²¹ Ibid., p. 30.

²² Ibid., p. 32.

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 120.

powers." Without vital powers, we are of course dead, though how we could represent that to ourselves Kant does not say.

Nieuwenhuis recollects how he admired, and thus in a certain way identified with, the brave Atjehnese man he saw just before his death. At this point Nieuwenhuis feels that he too could well have been killed. After we have made our way out of danger, according to Kant, there is a sense of well-being because we have escaped and because we know that our cognitive powers in fact do function, even if the overwhelming danger itself was and remains beyond our comprehension. We know that we are safe and that our mind functions. When we recover in this way, there is a moment of exhilaration, as we regain the ability to unify our thoughts. First comes a moment of disunity of perception experienced as death, if one so reads the "checking of our vital powers." Then, as Neil Hertz shows, in the descriptions of the experience of the sublime there is a consolidation not only of our cognition, but a reconfirmed sense of personal integration. We have the feeling of having escaped death. We were "almost" dead, and finding ourselves not so, we feel more ourselves than ever.²⁴

In the case of Nieuwenhuis, the moment just after the battle appears in his picture of Atjehnese corpses. Viewing it, one has no doubt who is who. The Dutch stand above looking down; the Atjehnese lie on the ground looking nowhere. This distinction, however, does not mean that the boundaries between the dead and the living, the Atjehnese and the Dutch, were always firmly in place. What follows Nieuwenhuis's moment of cognitive disorder—also, of course, a moment of killing—is a picture of corpses. It is a picture, that is to say, of the fate that Nieuwenhuis, so close to the battle, seems to have felt he narrowly avoided himself. All the more so since, although the corpses in the picture are all Atjehnese (there were seventy-nine of them), there were also five of the Dutch soldiers killed, one of them a European.²⁵

At the moment death occurred, it could not be shown. Just after, the corpses attest to its arrival. The photograph, then, shows the moment of consolidation in which what one avoided is illustrated to the degree possible. It thus fulfills the role given to it when it was an instrument used to mediate what had never before been seen. Such confusion, when the Dutch first landed, brought the risk, sometimes realized, of death upon them. Here, in this picture, the camera shows it has not mastered, but gone beyond, those moments of confusion and captured what it cannot and could not understand.

This photograph was not viewed differently from the way we are accustomed today to viewing photographs, particularly those of bloody events. We see pictures of the victims of earthquakes, massacres, and starvation from around the world almost daily. It is commonly said that, shocked as we might be, we still, in effect, say to ourselves "he is not me." In the end, we are satisfied and able to put these terrible images out of mind, though we of course do not want to admit our satisfaction to ourselves. Nonetheless, we enjoy seeing what we fear—the loss of ourselves—in order to be reassured that annihilation is not the case for us. This is the logic implicit in the

²⁴ Neil Hertz has two articles on the sublime in his book of collected essays entitled *The End of the Line* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). These essays are, to my mind, crucial in understanding the role of the sublime in the everyday life of modernity, including, of course, in understanding the place of photography.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

sublime. It is important today because it allows us to manage an economy of identification—"we are who we see"/"we are not"—by which the mass of photographs from no matter where becomes available to us and for which we develop a taste. Everyday we seem to need to see them.

To my knowledge, there were no Atjehnese photographers in the nineteenth century and probably none well into the twentieth. There was no one like the Javanese Céphas, who was taught photographic technique by a European and found a way to adapt it to his own condition. Naturally, the war itself was an obstacle to such a development, but it would not have been impossible. The Islamacist Snouck Hurgronje, for instance, could not have written his important ethnography, *The Achehnese*, without the help of his Atjehnese assistant. If, nonetheless, there was no Atjehnese photography, it was because the war was perceived by the Atjehnese side as a holy war (*prang sabil*). The doctrine of the holy war varies from century to century and even place to place. In Atjeh it meant that, under the prevailing circumstances, Muslims there had the duty to fight the unbeliever. One who died in the war against the unbelievers would not have to await the day of judgment to enter paradise. He would be instantly transported to that place, where he would enjoy all its pleasures. Under ordinary circumstances, the corpse in Islam is buried, never cremated, because it will rise again on the day of judgment. At that time its hands, its mouth, and the other parts of its body will testify to the worthiness of the person, and on that basis he will or will not be allowed to enter paradise. The corpse of someone who died in the holy war was sometimes displayed for a few days in honor of the deceased and to stimulate others to go on the jihad. The corpse was no longer the lifeless remains of someone lost to the living. It was the sign that the person was now alive in paradise.

The corpses and the graves of those who died in the holy war thus lost their function as memorials. The graves of some killed were thought to contain a certain power that worshippers at these places might appropriate. However, the objections of modernist Muslim leaders from the 1920s on largely eliminated this practice. Today there are not only no memorials in Atjeh to anyone killed in the holy war against the Dutch (this could be for religious reasons), there are also no statues or plaques of the sort that are raised by Indonesian nationalists to commemorate the anticolonial revolution. The preservation of the memory of the martyr is of no importance in the unusual condition in which the notion of the holy war prevails.

However the involuntary recurrence of the memory of the deceased might be dealt with, it was not by exteriorizing it in the form of memorials or by trying to stabilize it by embodying it in stories of martyrs. There are such stories in the epic devoted to the holy war, but they are few, and they often do not concern Atjehnese at all, but others who died in other places. The war, sometimes claimed as the moment in which Atjehnese nationalism was born, has in fact been largely ignored in recent times and into the present, as Atjehnese are demanding their independence from Indonesia. This indicates the success of the notion of the holy war, in which gaining paradise meant for many Muslims putting the world behind one. Martyrs were apparently seen from their own posthumous point of view. Thus the photograph of the person, a memorial too, of course, had no place. Atjehnese had no interest in photography at that moment in their history.

When “risk” means “I might not be killed,” rather than “I might have been killed” (this second response is typical, even instinctive, in cultures where the sublime is known), corpses take on a different sense. To the Atjehnese viewer at the time of the Dutch incursions, the view of corpses would not mean that the viewer had narrowly escaped, with the result that he is now even more himself. The image would mark at best his failure to achieve paradise and the neglect of his religious duty. The narrow escape that reinforces identity would be instead a moral reproach and a reminder of a worldly identity that the person was trying to shed.

The Dutch photographer who, in the midst of dead bodies, takes photographs and sends them home might share the glory or the opprobrium of the Dutch soldier. But the Atjehnese photographer who did the same would be sending nothing of importance. His association with death would not stimulate the imagination of risk, as the corpse would not allude to the destruction of the person, his loss, or the death that threatens us all and that we can imagine now through the photograph. The equivalent position for him, if there is one, would be paradise. Only there, in the place that eradicates death, loss, and suffering, could he send back pictures from an “elsewhere” that would stimulate Atjehnese to put themselves in the picture. Alas for us here today with our secular imaginations. We would find only one more tourist’s snapshot. Lacking, then, a notion of the sublime with Western roots, developed with religious overtones, and having no room for such an idea, Atjeh did without indigenous photographers.

The Atjehnese, Nieuwenhuis said, instead of surrendering, died “*klewangs* in hand,” swords in hand. Had they surrendered, they would have lived. It was not the pursuit of honor that led to their death, but the hope of gaining paradise. The *klewang* opened the gates. So doing, it had one of the functions of the camera: it revealed what no one had yet seen, in the way the camera helped to map uncharted land. The descriptions of paradise that assume its use are the major substance of the epic of the holy war. This epic testifies to the fact that, in the end, there was revelation and memorialization; after the end, there was still the world in which the epics were chanted. But there is a certain paradox in understanding the position of these texts. They pass on to others, later, whatever they might say. But they enjoin men to leave their families to find in paradise an existence that makes that break permanent. Paradise is not life on earth made perfect; it is life elsewhere, with all connection with earth broken. It is difficult for most people to imagine our own deaths without imagining those we leave behind; this is just what the texts that announce the holy war accomplish. They ask that they themselves, these texts, be forgotten. What the fate of the Koran itself would be I cannot say.

If the camera extended the power of the gun, the *klewang*’s relation to power was altogether ambiguous. One can rightly say that it extended the power of the Koran, turning its words into actions. But its power was also turned away from the world, and this was the chief message of the epic of the holy war: not the defeat of the unbeliever, but his death. And the unbeliever’s death figured as the means to one’s own. Furthermore, standing in relation to the Koran, the holy war was available to all Muslims without need for intermediaries. The *klewang*, then, was ungoverned by worldly centralized political authority. Even after Atjeh was finally considered pacified, up through the 1930s, almost to the time of the Dutch defeat by the Japanese,

individual Atjehnese, coordinated by no general plan of resistance, would suddenly stab Europeans in the hope of being killed themselves and gaining paradise. The Dutch considered them mad, and from a secular standpoint there is a case to be made for that view. Madness puts the person who suffers it outside communication. We lack sufficient words for its various forms, and necessarily so, since we cannot see from the point of view of the mad; some of the mad suffer, others seem happy. But the mad by definition live in worlds that are unavailable to the rest of us. With these Atjehnese, long after Atjeh had been restored to order, its economy functioning, a nascent modern form of nationalism on the rise, family life again established, the older way continued. Killings continued. And always it seems by stabbing, if not with the *klewang*, then with the other important Atjehnese weapon, the *reuntjong*, or Atjehnese dagger.²⁶ A fetishistic power, again figuring in relation to death, phallic in form, but outside phallocentric organization, the dagger came to be used less frequently, but its uses did not cease. But this took place in an Atjehnese world that progressively refused to take the claim of the jihad to heart, and which, therefore, isolated the perpetrators and led to the cultural forgetting of the holy war against the Dutch.

The camera assumes the presence of a viewer to see the picture and in some way to have it reflect himself back to himself. The *klewang* was a weapon whose goal, from a secular point of view, was to eliminate self-consciousness. In my opinion, the eradication of memories of the war as important elements in the politics and the identity of Acehnese shows that, by and large, it—the elimination of consciousness of self—succeeded. There is nothing in the logic of the holy war that can bring it to an end except the defeat of the unbeliever. However, without this defeat, and with the restoration of a functioning economy and the rise of ideas of nationalism, the promise of the jihad in Atjeh gradually lost its force for most. Eventually, few in this world saw what the *klewang* and *reuntjong* revealed when their mission was taken seriously. If one thinks that the *klewang* was used to eliminate self-consciousness, this, perhaps, is the sign that it succeeded; not of course by instituting the holy war in the heart of Acehnese society, leaving a place where Atjehnese could always find not themselves, but the negation of themselves. Rather success was accomplished by having a highly important segment of their history that depended on the practice of the holy war for its energy and focus remain suspended in Acehnese memory; remain, that is, without being incorporated into the dialectical development of Acehnese identity. The recitation of the epic of the holy war gradually stopped. On the other hand, photographs, taken mainly by Chinese commercial photographers, appeared, showing those Atjehnese who could afford to have their portraits made, attesting to a world where memory of a conventional kind was restored.

Before the conventional functioning of Atjehnese society was fully reestablished, the very lack of a wish to leave behind memory in the world made it possible for individuals to perceive death in the holy war as a goal that could be achieved through individual action, without the need for the candidate to imagine how he would be viewed by the community. They could thus continue their suicidal killing even when

²⁶ For an exposition of the jihad or holy war as it was understood in Atjeh during the anticolonial war, see James T. Siegel, *Shadow and Sound: The Historical Thought of a Sumatran People* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 229-265, and James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000 [1969]), pp. 68-77. For a discussion of the continuation of the jihad by individuals, see Siegel, *The Rope of God*, pp. 82ff.

the community had lost interest in martyrdom. It is exactly this that made the Dutch feel that the acts of such people were not political, but the effects of madness.

But it would be better to accept the holy war according to the terms set by the Atjehnese and to follow their logic. The lines from the Koran that founded the jihad are these: "God has bought from the believers their selves and their possessions against the gift of paradise; they fight in the way of God; they kill and are killed; that is a promise binding upon God ..." (9:111) Dying in the holy war, one achieves paradise directly without waiting for the Day of Judgment. These lines were propagated not directly from the recitation of the Koran, however, but principally through the Atjehnese literary form called the *hikayat*, and in particular through the *Hikayat Prang Sabil*, the *Hikayat of the Holy War*, various versions of which were written in Aceh during the war.²⁷ It is by interpreting them in the tradition of the *hikayat* that we can return to consideration of the camera.

According to the great Islamicist, colonial advisor, and ethnographer, Christian Snouck Hurgronje, to whom we have been referring off and on in this essay, the *hikayat* tradition was likely to have been of considerable length. He based his judgment on two *hikayats* from the eighteenth century, which, he believed, were of such outstanding quality that many more must have preceded them. The earlier body of work had disappeared, however.

Their disappearance was probably not an accident. The chanting of *hikayat* was done in such a way that the contents of the epic were dissolved as listeners attended to its sounds. The *hikayat*'s prosodic structure made this possible. All *hikayats* have the same strict structure, consisting of a line divided into two phrases, with a single rhyme at the end of the line and another bisecting the phrases of the line. *Hikayats* were chanted to a single melody with two tempi, fast and slow. As it was explained to me, one follows the rhyme scheme, which, along with other things, such as the tempi and the melody, breaks up the meanings of the line. An example:

Hantòm/ di gòb/ na di geutanjðë/ sabðh/ nanggrðë/

Never by others exists by us one land

Dua/ RAJA/

Two KINGS

Here the rhymes occur in the syllables underlined as well as at the end of each line. The linking of "us" (*geutanjðë*) with "land" (*nanggrðë*), rather than with "gòb" (others), with which it is contrasted, is a first example of how the sense of the sentence is broken up in favor of conveying the sounds of the words. Rhyme divorced from meaning in this way makes it seem as if certain words respond to patterns set before the construction of meaning and without reference to what is said. All the more so, of course, because of the repetitive nature of the prosodic structure. The final rhyme, for instance, is likely to go unchanged for over two thousand lines. Similarly, the melody is likely to begin in the middle of the line and to end there as well. It too is repetitious; one melody was repeated 662 times in a *hikayat* of 2,117 lines. Furthermore the tempi are likely to be used so that they contrast with what is portrayed. Thus a battle scene might be recited in slow tempo. Acehnese describe listening to chants delivered in this

²⁷ The text referred to can be found in translation in Siegel, *Shadow and Sound*.

way with the word "*mangat*," or "delicious." They devour the contents, as it were, taking them in, as they drift in and out of the performance, listening when they are hungry to do so, as it were, and resting when they are satiated.

The decomposition of the contents might seem merely an aesthetic pleasure, that is, one sealed off from the rest of life in the interest of enjoyment. But it is not exactly that. The epics were the major archives of Atjehnese history. In effect, Atjehnese were devouring their own past. One can see this in one of the *hikayats* that Snouck praised. That *hikayat* describes the most revered Atjehnese king to be a coward. A European account shows the same man dispatching elephants to trample to death anyone the king thought a threat to himself. In this context, it is easy to understand the *hikayat* as an instrument of defense, set against whatever menaced Atjehnese, whether it be the king or the past more generally.

The long-term effect of *hikayat* recitation was to eliminate history. But no society can continue without its archive: its genealogy, at the very least, its tracing of kinship, is necessary to its very structure. Were the *hikayats* ever to have been decisive, permanently effective, Atjehnese society would have disappeared. I argue that, in effect, this is what happened. But not before the war with the Dutch.

The structure of the *hikayat*, its modes of recitation and hearing, stood in contrast with everyday speech. In the first there was the alternation of the two reciters' voices, echos of each other, at best, rather than replies, tending toward music. Heard or overheard by listeners, they produced a pleasure leading out of the world as meaningful sound decomposed. In everyday life there were alternating responses as each speaker in turn listened and replied, engaging speakers with each other and thus locating them in the present world. It was a question of one set of rules or another, marking off two linguistic realms. These were not merely coexisting registers to which one could turn as one chose. They were antithetical. One could "speak" in the language of the *hikayat*, but what one said was then not presented, as speech might be as, for instance, in opera, especially after Wagner. Rather, to say something "in *hikayat*," as it were, would be to decompose what was said. The prosodic structure of the *hikayat* was the opposite of what has been posited for the Yugoslav epic, for instance. It was not an aid to memory, but a means of setting aside what was said, to the point where the success of doing so can be judged by the disappearance of the *hikayat*, a tribute not to its failure, but to its success.

Prosodic form seems to have remained constant. Whatever was set into it was eventually lost. What remained was the form itself, at hand to take on all sorts of things, whether historical events, stories arriving from outside Aceh, or fantasies. The only important modification came with the Atjehnese War. With it came the definitive end of the *hikayat* tradition. After that point, no more were written, or at least none that ever became popular. And this is because a final pleasure was made possible, one that no longer depended on the reduction of sense to sounds, but rather on the sealing off of the picture of paradise in another form and another language, a sacred language, indicating something attainable in its full form only after death.

The *Hikayat of the Holy War* in its most popular version is the story of a young man who overhears his elders, who are speaking of the holy war, quote the lines of the Koran I have cited. These lines are of course in Arabic, and then paraphrased, rather

than translated, into Acehnese. "Hearing the line from the Koran, Moeda Bahlia felt a yearning ... It was as if he were already dead." He decides to go to the holy war. He has a dream of entering paradise. When he awakens, he tells his elders the pleasures he saw there and how he met the nymph who will be his wife. He then goes to battle. There "he chopped away like lightning running through clouds. The unbelievers collapsed front, back, left, and right ... [Until finally] Moeda Bahlia then became drowsy, his body weak and without energy. He had no one left with him, and so he joined his fallen comrades."

The lines from the Koran are exempt from the prosodic structure of the *hikayat*. They are chanted in Arabic according to the rules that govern Koranic recitation. With this, the decomposition of sense becomes a rhetorical device, a way of intensifying what is said about paradise. It shows that no representation is adequate to the description of heavenly bliss. As an attempt to indicate something that cannot be comprehended, these recitations might constitute a step in the logic of the sublime, except that another tradition altogether intervenes. The pleasures of paradise await, sealed off by their setting in holy Arabic, immune to the sort of listening that the prosodic structure of Acehnese offered before the war, while the Acehnese language itself becomes merely a way of inadequately paraphrasing inalterable holy truth.

Within the *hikayat* there are a series of images of the nymphs, the rivers of paradise, ("Along the river bank all was green and white ..." 242), jewelry, and even the market ("The market was a not place where things were sold but a place of pleasure for every day. [There were] fine clothes and diamonds for hands and toes." 243), and so on. These are related by the boy to his elders and by the reciters of the *hikayat* to their listeners. These pictures thus have viewers. But their point is that they mark not the end of the world, but rather the stimulation of the suicidal end of their viewers, who are told about them to incite them to join the holy war, to destroy themselves there. They are photographs in a way, but photographs that contravene the idea of photography as we commonly understand it.

The purpose of these images is to stimulate listeners to find the originals by going to the holy war themselves. I do not want to say that they are photographs *avant le lettre*, however. Photographs, at least of the sort we have seen, depend on the logic of the sublime. One sees death and one escapes it in the very act of doing so. One is reconstituted as oneself, even more coherently so than before. These pictures have the effect of dissolving the viewer/listener. He is not to regain himself. Thus the *hikayat* no longer functions as an *hikayat* did before the war, as an antirepresentational machine, but as a literary form promoting representation. The assumption about the *hikayat* as it functioned before the holy war was that it was always available as a defense against the world, turning its events into senseless pleasure. After the holy war, sense and pleasure were conjoined. There was now only one topic, and it was meant to be pictured and preserved. But the preservation of images was meant to be only temporary. It was to last until the original was found. One does not recover from the description of paradise or the fighting of the Atjehnese War feeling more oneself. The aim, on the contrary, was not to recover at all. Instead, inspired by the *hikayat*, one is compelled to go and actually destroy oneself. The separation between oneself and whatever it is that produces a feeling of sublimity is neither attained nor sought. The

hikayat is now at odds with social life. It attempts to separate the listener from the world and to prevent his exit from the pleasure of listening.

The subject who could completely enjoy the pleasures the *hikayat* now promised, of course, is the dead person in the photographs we have seen. With the invention of this new subject, the *hikayat* form became a funeral ritual, but a peculiar one. It lacked the aim of such rituals—to turn the memory of a deceased person from involuntary to voluntary memory, retrievable at will, a transformation that insures it will not appear as an invasion. Instead the aim was to exhaust the viewers/listeners of the *hikayat*, to effect their disappearance from the earth without regard for their memorialization. They would survive only in paradise, the last memory of them being the moment of transition as their earthly identities were shed. With the success of the *Hikayat Prang Sabil*, there would then be no body of people left whom one could imagine as guarding the memory of the deceased. Of course, I do not claim that the idea of the holy war was totally successful in Atjeh. Many Atjehnese survived. But there is evidence that the concept of the holy war was pervasive at the time. Had it not been so, had there been instead an idea of martyrdom as it is understood now in the Palestine of what we call “suicide bombers,” whose aim is as political as it is religious, the memory of martyrs would have survived. But that is not the case. There are no memorials to the holy war in Aceh today. Nor is the war much referred to during a historical moment when the inhabitants of the Province of Aceh, opposing Indonesia, claim to be no longer Indonesian, but Acehnese.

Without memorialization—which means there is no intent or expectation that a viewer will see the photo later, perhaps after the death of both the photographer and the photographed—there can be no interest in photography. It took decades after the war ended for Acehnese to become photographers themselves. This does not mean that there were no photographs of Atjehnese, however, as we have seen. But these photographs were neither for nor made by Atjehnese. They were made by Dutch photographers for Dutch consumption. They were made on various occasions, one of which is of special interest. When Atjehnese surrendered, Dutch often photographed them, no doubt to create pictures which, when viewed in the Netherlands, would build support for the war there. It was not only Atjehnese who were photographed. There is a photograph of a man called Demang Léman, an important figure from the Bandjarmasin war, photographed in shackles ten minutes before his execution. Rob Nieuwenhuys, who reproduced this picture in one of his volumes of photographs, says of Demang Léman that “he looks at the photographer [one might rather say, ‘camera’] uncomplainingly, almost indifferently, but in any case, without fear.”²⁸ The surrender, when not followed by execution, was not always final. Teuku Umar, the most famous warrior chief of the Atjehnese war, surrendered, was made an ally of the Dutch, and then, after he had defeated numbers of his fellow Atjehnese, and after having been heavily armed by the Dutch, he changed sides again. Dutch troops then hunted him down. Hundreds were killed on both sides before he was slain. His wife, Tjut Nja’ Din, who was nearly blind, replaced him as head of his followers and fought the Dutch fiercely. Then one of her bodyguards, who had also been the bodyguard of her late husband, led them to her. The Dutch photographed her also. It is said that “she

²⁸ Rob Nieuwenhuys, *Met vreemde ogen: Tempo doeloe—een verzonken wereld: fotografische documenten uit het oude Indië 1870-1920* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1988), p. 149.

behaved savagely, screaming, cursing, and spitting.”²⁹ In the picture she is scarcely indifferent. But what is interesting is that she is not facing the camera. Her hands are bent in the gesture of Islamic prayer. She is beseeching God, still full of fury. Here, God has replaced the camera as the one who, in her estimation, sees her.

I think this is true even of others who surrendered and who faced the camera. One need not be anguished facing God. One might be indifferent to one’s captors, as Nieuwenhuys said of Demang Léman, and as can be seen, for instance, in a photograph Nieuwenhuys reproduces of a group of chiefs who have surrendered. The man second from the left in this picture has three *klewang* slashes on his face. When he smoked, the smoke issued from five places in his head. This extreme disfigurement does not prevent him from having the same expression as the others. They have none of the shame of the defeated. They look straight at the camera, but it is evident that they are not defying their captors nor do they appear defeated. Demang Léman leans on the chair, relaxed despite being bound. The chiefs stand erect and look straight forward. The energy of their bodies, apparent in their posture, is transferred to their eyes. They are not subjugated in attitude, but neither are they conventionally defiant. If they are defiant, it is not toward their executioners but toward anyone who dares return their gaze, understanding that moments later they will die and that this knowledge informs their look.

“Defiance” is not the exact word for them. They are, I believe, indifferent. Which is to say that they do not anticipate the return gaze of the photographer nor of those who will see the photographs. Their images will be preserved, but they will never see them. They are, in that sense, about to disappear, and they do not regret it. Their disappearance is a curse of a sort. These people still have the holy war in mind. They face viewers who do not understand them, and who, as *kafirs*, promise only savagery in all its senses. But the indifference of those photographed does not stem simply from the impossibility of mutual understanding occurring across such a gap. It derives also from their comprehension that their own disappearance forecasts that of their viewers. Their indifference says, in effect, that whoever sees their images meets an empty gaze. It is “empty” not because it lacks life, but rather “empty” because it does not anticipate a response. The presence of the potential viewer is of no value to these subjects because they do not value memorialization. Whoever sees these pictures and understands what they mean will lack a reflection of himself in the gaze of the photographed subject. The viewer thus disappears along with those invested in the jihad. Such is the curse.

These photographs, of course, belong to the archive of Atjehnese history. Their curse seals that archive, protecting it against anyone who interrogates it. They mark the line between a culture where the sublime is established and one where it is not. Nieuwenhuis, seeing the old Atjehnese man just before he blew himself up, knows that the man now is in a realm to which he, Nieuwenhuis, has no access. He knows he cannot comprehend anything about the state of the man after that moment. But he has a name for the elsewhere, “death,” where the man is, he knows, now to be found. He, Nieuwenhuis, is on one side, “death” is on the other.

“Dead,” however, is not the word Atjehnese of that era accepted for the man’s condition, and consequently they did not accept the difference between themselves

²⁹ Ibid., p. 163.

and the overwhelming power that Kant claimed was produced with sublimity. Their elsewhere was not that of the Dutch. It is not a simple matter of contrasting beliefs, however. Atjehnese produced an elsewhere out of language. In the context of discourses within Atjeh, between the *hikayat* and everyday speech, the *hikayat* for a while was ascendant. The *hikayat* achieved that place, however, only by incorporating an element foreign to its structure. The jihad of that time was the culmination of a process of the elimination of history already contained in Atjehnese literature, but which could only succeed as far as it did by modifying the prosodic structure on which it depended. Doing so, it introduced a reference analogous to, but in competition with, the power said to produce sublimity. Eventually, with the introduction of modernity through nationalism, Atjehnese came to share the cultivation of the sublime which Kant said was necessary to it.

The line between the two systems is not absolute. Photographs of captured Atjehnese show that one infiltrated the other. The persons of the photographs, now of course long deceased, still tell us that they ignore us, that they are dead in a way beyond our capacity to understand or even to put aside by saying that we do not understand as we turn to Atjehnese history. It is that persistence which, I believe, prevents a jihad in Aceh today of the sort that the Atjehnese practiced earlier.