History in the Aftermath of Dictatorship:
An interview with Azhari Aiyub, Director of Tikar Pandan, Banda Aceh, Indonesia.
Introduction and translation by Jess Melvin.

Aceh, the westernmost province of Indonesia, is no stranger to controversy over its long and often violent history. The site of separatist conflict between 1976 and 2005, Aceh, unlike most other provinces in Indonesia, was not able to enjoy for long the period of liberalisation, which occurred during the aftermath of the fall of Suharto’s New Order regime (1965–1998).

Between 1989 and 1998 Aceh was designated a ‘Military Operations Zone’ as the military actively attempted to bring an end to the insurgency led by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). The fall of the New Order regime created a vacuum of power in the province, allowing both civil society to take a breath and GAM to regroup. This new-found freedom to organise steadily grew into a mass movement which demanded a referendum to allow Aceh to be granted independence from Indonesia. The newly reconsolidated Indonesian state hit back in 2001, resuming increasingly violent military operations which culminated in the formal declaration of martial law in the province between 2003 and 2004. Cases of human rights abuse were rampant in the province during this period and freedom of expression was heavily curtailed.

Discussion about Aceh’s past was particularly sensitive as both sides in the conflict attempted to win the ‘heart and minds’ of the Acehnese to their own often simplistic versions of Acehnese history. To GAM, Aceh had been ‘tricked’ into becoming incorporated into the Indonesian state at Independence in 1945, while, to the
Indonesian state, Aceh was seen as a “shining light” of the Indonesian revolution, which had betrayed the nation when it succumbed to separatist sentiment.

In the midst of this struggle the worst excesses of military control over state curriculum remained firmly in place. The fall of the New Order regime had seen the end of the ‘Dwifungi’ (dual function) doctrine, which enshrined the active role of the military in Indonesian political life. New Order ideology, however, proved harder to dismantle. History lessons at primary and secondary school level throughout Indonesia during the New Order period were propaganda sessions, designed to justify the military’s rise to power in 1965 on the back of one of the twentieth century’s worst cases of state sponsored mass murder. This same state curriculum remained in place in 1998, and remains, to this day, to be significantly altered. In Aceh, thrust back under military control, this curriculum came to serve the added purpose of justifying the current crackdown in the province.

History as a discipline based on inquiry and analysis was also not taught at the tertiary level in Aceh during the New Order period or throughout the period of military operations in the province. The only way to study History at university in Aceh was at the teacher training faculty, where students were versed to become disseminators of the propaganda taught to school children. Formally, this situation was not so different to other provinces in Indonesia, where the study of History at the tertiary level remains constrained to this day by the legacies of military rule. The effects of martial law in Aceh, however, which also resulted in heavy censorship of the press, were able to magnify this problem in the province. Support for an alternate view of the past could literally be a matter of life or death.

The unexpected end to the conflict in late 2005, sparked by the devastating 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, brought an end to military operations in the province and allowed new space for freedom of expression. It is now even possible to study social sciences at university in the province. This process has unleashed an outpouring of social commentary in local newspapers and magazines and encouraged the establishment of a plethora of non-government research and cultural organisations.
Azhari Aiyub, who has been described as ‘the author of Aceh’,¹ is a recognised writer of literature and poetry. He uses his craft to ask questions about controversial issues in Aceh’s past, such as human rights abuses in Aceh and the 1965 mass killings in the province. He won the Free World Award by the Netherlands-based Poets of All Nations for his compilation of short stories Perempuan Pala² (Nutmeg Woman) in 2005, and was long listed for the Khatulistiwa Literary Award during the same year. Written during the period of martial law in the province, these stories were a way for him to subvert the restrictions, which existed in academia and the press to discuss these difficult and controversial subjects.

In 2002 Azhari helped to establish Tikar Pandan (Pandan Mat), a non-government organisation initially established as a writers’ school to encourage Acehnese youth to begin to express themselves and put their experiences into words. Tikar Pandan has since grown into a cultural institution with its own not-for-profit publishing house, and has been involved in the establishment of the Aceh Human Rights Museum.

Azhari, could you please tell us a little bit about yourself and Tikar Pandan?
I was born and grew up in Banda Aceh. I studied at the Faculty of Teaching and Educational Science, taking literature and languages, but I didn’t finish. I mainly write fiction. Fiction has the ability to uncover how facts are put together and how they are able to influence our understanding about the world we live in. Tikar Pandan (Pandan Mat), the place where I work, is an organisation that hopes to develop a culture of literacy and love for literature in Aceh. Politics has influenced us, it is what helped us to establish Tikar Pandan and has shaped what we stand for.

What was it like growing up under a military dictatorship, then a state of martial law, in which representations of the past were closely controlled by the state?

¹ The Jakarta Post, 16 November 2008.
The great story of the Indonesian national revolution, which pushed aside colonialism and imperialism, cannot help but produce great admiration for the military (which was often at the forefront of this violent struggle). However, there was only a little opening to begin to counter this hero worship, such as was achieved by Idrus during the 1940s. Idrus—a writer who Pramoedya Ananta Toer describes as his teacher—is a paradox within the military written history of this country. This is because his stories often called into question the sincerity of the people’s militias that participated in the revolution. In my opinion, he was not only a good writer of characters, but his explanation of the character of soldiers and their leaders has proven to be a terrifying prediction of what the New Order regime would become. Sixty years ago Idrus had already declared the military to be bandit-like in nature. This was true throughout the period of the New Order regime, and it continues to this day. People are still being driven from their land and traditional way of life because they

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3 Idrus (1921-1979) is an Indonesian author best known for his realistic short stories and novels. He is particularly famous for his short stories written during the Indonesian national revolution between 1945-49. He moved to Melbourne in 1965 to serve as a lecturer at Monash University.

4 Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) is considered to be one of Indonesia's greatest writers. His works span the colonial period, Indonesia’s struggle for Independence, the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, as well as the post-colonial regimes of Sukarno and Suharto. He was imprisoned on Buru Island from 1969-1979 for being a member of the Indonesian Communist Party's cultural organisation LEKRA. He is most famous for his collection of historical novels the *Buru Quartet*, written during his time on Buru Island, which were banned in Indonesia under the New Order regime.

5 The Indonesian national revolution (1945-1949) was largely fought by independent militia groups. These militia groups were not fully brought under the control of the national military until the 1950s.

6 Military personnel and those connected to the military continue to enjoy disproportionate influence within Indonesian politics. The current Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, for example, is a retired army general. Meanwhile, of the four major candidates for Indonesia’s upcoming 2014 presidential election, two are former military personnel: Prabowo was a Special Forces soldier and Wiranto is the former Commander of the Indonesian military. Both have been implicated in human rights abuses. Megawati Sukarnoputri, who is seeking re-election, oversaw the period of Marital Law in Aceh during her time as President between 2001 and 2004. Aburizal Bakrie, meanwhile, is Chairman of Golkar, the official state party under the New Order military dictatorship.
are unable to stand up to the corporations who enjoy the protection of the military.

Under the New Order regime it is hard to say that life in Aceh was worse than other provinces in Indonesia. Cases of land seizure were at their worst during this period, along with the silencing of freedom of expression and the exploitation of natural resources throughout the archipelago. On top of this, the Regime also massacred almost one million people (between 1965-1968) who were accused of being communists, and launched a campaign of continual stigmatisation of their descendants.

Almost all Indonesian citizens have had a bad experience with the military, and today the difference is only the scale of the destruction that they experience. The people of Aceh, Papua and Timor Leste as well as those who were accused of being communist are amongst those most seriously affected. Without the people of Indonesia directly experiencing the cruelty of the military, the narratives written by Idrus and Pramoedya, for example, may have only produced a feeling of scepticism towards the monuments to military heroism which have been erected by the military, or indeed towards the historical texts that they have compiled (which have since become the country’s official historical narrative).

Yet, since military operations resumed in Aceh the military taught me something really important: reasons to hate them. Besides the killings and the house raids that were carried out against civilians during the military operations, there were also seemingly simpler reasons for why the military began to sow the seeds of hatred in the community. For example, at the time of the military operations in Aceh, there were many military trucks on the roads in Aceh. These trucks loaded with military personnel were disturbing enough, yet no matter where they went their drivers would not stop hitting their horns. This was a message to other road users that they should move to the side of the road to allow the military trucks to pass. We were continually forced to give way to them, as if only their activities were important.

When and how did you start to realise that these representations of the past might be problematic? Did this influence your decision to establish Tikar Pandan?
It is only natural that *Tikar Pandan* grew out of the problems which occurred in Aceh. Under the control of the military, which occurred as we were growing up, we could see that Jakarta had a strategy to isolate Aceh. We could not see outside of the province, and people on the outside could not see us. People outside of Aceh also asked why Aceh demanded a referendum, they almost couldn’t see the humanitarian disaster that was occurring in Aceh. They think the people of Aceh are comfortable enough because of the existence of Exxon-Mobil and other big companies in the province. In fact, according to the poverty index, Aceh is one of the worst-off provinces in Indonesia.

One of the myths that has persisted since the period of Dutch colonialism in Aceh is that Aceh is a place of pirates and people holding *rencong* (a traditional Acehnese dagger) in their mouths. Cases of terrorism occur in every town in Indonesia, yet when a group of terrorists from Java, which the military had been pursuing since 2009, moved their business to Aceh and were discovered in 2010, the newspapers and magazines in Jakarta called them Acehnese Terrorists, a label that is not used when terrorist actions occur in other provinces. This of course hurts. Little by little *Tikar Pandan* tries to improve the image of Aceh. This should be the job of the Public Relations office in the Aceh provincial government.

To begin with we set out to help support the literary culture that was beginning to develop among the younger generation in Aceh. During the early 2000s it was very hard to get good books in Aceh. You had to go to Java to get them, or to even get a Che Guevara t-shirt. We believe that without a strong literary culture it is difficult to think critically and to escape the political isolation imposed by Jakarta. At the time of the latest military operations we also opened a free writing school for young people. This school did not teach the technical aspects of writing, rather, our hope was that the participants would come to develop their own ideas about the situation we found ourselves in, something which proved to be a great challenge. This school has now operated for ten years.

Since the military left, the opinion of writers has become increasingly important. The newspapers in Aceh lie about basic facts. They also express personal views about women that are disturbing. It is said openly in the newspapers for example that women who go out at
night are whores and prostitutes. Readers in turn also in general accept this as true. Sometimes I think it would be best to become illiterate and not to know anything compared with what is written in the papers.

I can’t remember exactly when I began to think like this, or whether this process occurred in exactly the same way for my colleagues who have also been involved in establishing Tikar Pandan. In my opinion, my own journey has been affected by my experience of growing up in the ‘90s in a small town that was safe enough, but which was also beginning to experience cruelty.

Tikar Pandan has created a Human Rights Museum, which seeks to educate the public about atrocities perpetrated during the separatist conflict in Aceh. Could you please tell us a little about the process of establishing this Museum and the inspirations and objectives behind it?

Tikar Pandan did not establish this museum by itself, rather we worked together with four other organisations: LBH Banda Aceh (Banda Aceh Legal Aide Organisation), Kontras Aceh (Commission

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7 On 6 September 2012, a young teenage girl from East Aceh with the initials ‘P.E.’ committed suicide after she and her friend were accused in the media of being ‘whores’ and ‘prostitutes’ and of engaging in ‘adultery’. They had been arrested by the province’s Syariah Police (Wilayatul Hisbah) for being out at night without a male relative to escort them. ‘Diberitakan Sebagai Pelacur, Gadis Ini Bunuh Diri’, TEMPO, 17 September 2012.
for the ‘Disappeared’ and Victims of Violence, Aceh), Koalisi NGO HAM Aceh (Colalition of Human Rights NGOs in Aceh) and ICTJ (the International Centre for Transitional Justice). We established a consortium, with the Human Rights Museum as an independent entity. The members of these organisations are involved in advocating for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Aceh. With the exception of Tikar Pandan, the other four organisations are focused on advocating on behalf of victims of cases of human rights abuses in Aceh. The role of Tikar Pandan in the Museum is to carry out its curation and other activities. Different to most museums, it houses a memorial. The Museum itself has been set up in a disused garage at our office.

Since the end of Martial Law in Aceh in 2005 there is yet to be any certainty regarding the establishment of a TRC in Aceh. The law which established the need to open a TRC has been blocked in parliament, with Aceh’s provincial government and the national parliament in Jakarta each attempting to pass responsibility for its implementation to the other. In general, the issue of past human rights abuse is becoming increasingly less spoken about. Of course we continue to have hope that the government will deal with these past human rights abuses. In the meantime we have established our own memorial to victims of the conflict. This memorial was not intended to place pressure on the government, though we do hope that it will remind them that simply trying to forget human rights abuses is a mistake and not a solution to the problems surrounding the blocking of the law for the establishment of a TRC. The parliament is too set in its ways to resolve this issue. We believe that everyone has a right to know about their past. Human rights abuses can be carried out by anybody and this is not simply a matter for past generations, but also for those that are yet to come. We run the risk that these abuses will repeat themselves if they are not dealt with.

**Could you please describe some of the main exhibits and messages at the Museum?**

We don’t hold many activities at the memorial. Once a year we invite someone to give a memorial lecture, where the importance of applying human rights values to every day life is discussed. A mural on the wall depicts several dark scenes from our past. Several key words closely associated with the conflict in Aceh are Martial Law,
Operation Red Net,\(^8\) the Simpang KKA Massacre\(^9\) and political killings. We have placed depictions of these events in frames with descriptions.

The most important thing for the memorial is to provide a sense of peace and respect those who were ‘disappeared’ during that time and whose fate is still not known to this day. We have set aside a special place to display their photos, which has become a public memorial. Visitors are able to pray, reflect and leave flowers there.

We don’t talk about having or collecting artifacts at the Museum. Before there is a TRC it is wrong to think of this Museum as a conventional museum: a big building with different exhibits every month, with the clothing and shoes of victims or torture implements on display in glass boxes. Before this can happen a discussion must happen with victims and their families. We have to be very careful about deciding what is and isn’t appropriate to display. Our Museum is a reflection of the conviction of many that there is still a need for justice and a process of truth telling about what happened in the past. It is a way of saying that we have not forgotten.

We are currently expanding the scope of the Museum through setting up a Virtual Museum on our website. We are compiling an online encyclopedia with information about the key words discussed above. Achieving a new consensus over how the past should be viewed is not merely a matter of having power (such as possessed by the state), but also a matter of being able to reinterpret certain events and words and being able to influence how people look at these events.

How does the Museum attempt to challenge accepted understandings of the conflict and how has it been received in the community?\(^2\)

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\(^8\) Operation Red Net (Operasi Jaring Merah) is the official code name given to operations carried out by the Indonesian military during the period Aceh was classified as a Military Operations Zone between 1989-1998. This operation resulted in intense human rights violations in the province.

\(^9\) The Simpang KKA Massacre occurred in May 1999 at a crossroads (simpang) near the Kertas Kraft Aceh pulp and paper mill in North Aceh when military personnel shot forty-six people, including children, dead. Video footage of troops firing on the unarmed protesters was circulated widely in Aceh.
To date the reaction from the public has been fairly positive, they don’t see anything wrong with the Museum’s existence. In Aceh public opinion has been divided over the issue of past human rights abuses since Jakarta formalised the implementation of Islamic Law (Syariat Islam) in Aceh.¹⁰ Some religious organisations consider the concept of ‘human rights’ to have come from the West with the aim of weakening Islam. To these groups anything considered to be related to ‘human rights’ is looked upon cynically.

Before the Museum was established, Kontras, LBH and Koalisi NGO HAM held discussions with their associated victims groups about its concept. These organisations are also active with their own activities, such as commemorating important dates, including the Simpang KKA Massacre. They hold memorials every year at the place where the massacre occurred.

Something interesting occurred when we announced the opening of the Museum. The Director of the Museum, Mr. Reza Idria, received a parcel from a certain foundation, a book written in Acehnese with a letter also written in Acehnese expressing the hope that this book would become part of the Museum’s collection. We had never heard of this foundation before. It appears that it was established by the military, and the book outlined several cases of human rights abuses carried out by GAM during the conflict. We accepted the book and expressed our thanks. The message to us was clear, they (the military involved in this foundation) also wanted to be heard. At the very least, this message shows us that the truth about the conflict in Aceh will never come from just one side.

Do you think the retelling of the past, such as is achieved through the Museum, can help to resolve ongoing tensions in the community? This resolution can only be achieved through understanding why disturbances appear to occur so easily in Indonesian society. Last year I wrote a report about violence and alleged insults towards religious belief in Aceh. From this report it became apparent that the population is quite easily insulted and willing to attack those with

¹⁰ A form of Islamic law was first officially implemented in Aceh in 2003. The extent of its jurisdiction has since been expanded. Islamic dress, including the wearing of a headscarf for women, is compulsory. The drinking of alcohol, gambling and adultery are punishable by public caning.
different beliefs from their own. The state meanwhile, which should act as a mediator, appears to always be looking for a way to get political mileage out of these disturbances. The state appears to be quite skilled at managing these conflicts, but not with the aim of bringing them to an end. In regards to disturbances or conflicts in the community, the state has yet to change its thinking. A new Law on the Handling of Social Conflicts has just been passed in Indonesia. This presents a new opportunity for impunity because it legislates that the military is able to evaluate the level of threat to security in the community.

In the current climate a museum is one of the best forums to present new views on many issues. A museum is not only able to hold stories, told from the perspective of victims, it is also able to attempt to change the stories that have been told about them. Not only this, museums are also able to serve the function of educating the public. This is very important to us. This is because during the conflict in Aceh the military was very aware of how they needed to establish a particular narrative to explain from their perspective how the conflict began as well as to explain what was happening. They used many mediums to control this narrative without having to use force--the book that I mentioned above is one example of this. As another example, I have just discovered a comic book issued by the Aceh Military’s Bureau of Information which was used for propaganda purposes in the province which explains the importance of ‘keeping the peace’ from the military’s perspective.

Do you think there are still any particular taboos in talking about Aceh’s past?
Generally no. However, there are some groups of victims of human rights abuses in Aceh that are choosing to keep their stories to themselves, especially those who are victims of rape. It is not easy for them to talk about this trauma.

Do you support the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Aceh? What would you like a TRC in Aceh to achieve? What obstacles stand in the way of its establishment?
Of course we support the establishment of a TRC. Within civil society those of us involved in the Museum are all part of a working group set up to achieve this objective. The cruelty of those who stand in the way of a TRC is the same as those who deny that human rights
abuses have occurred in Aceh. A TRC is not only important for Aceh, or even just for Indonesia, but also for the international community. Without a TRC it is difficult to imagine that our grandchildren will not experience a repeat of similar circumstances.

The biggest difficulty in establishing a TRC in my opinion is that both the Government of Indonesia and the GAM leadership can only see the short term risks that they might face and so they refuse to open the door to speaking openly about the past. They are trying to switch discussion about the need for a TRC with discussion about ‘prosperity’ (related to economic development) in the province, with the hope that this will make people come to accept their past. These are two different issues. You can not quench a thirst by eating bread. New prosperity does not reduce the need for justice. I think that this is a problem faced by those in power everywhere. As Gabriel García Márquez (the Colombian author who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982) has remarked: when you reach absolute power, there is no contact with reality, and that’s the worst kind of solitude there can be.

The ‘truth telling’ aspect of TRCs has been described as the process of establishing a new official historical narrative. In your opinion, is it possible for there to be true reconciliation in Aceh without such a process? What would you consider to be the main issues that need to be addressed for this to occur?

I am not certain if true reconcilliation can occur in Aceh, this is because feelings of revenge can grow wherever people think that justice is being sought. This is something that is very saddening because what is needed now is political will on behalf of the government to carry out such a process. The search for truth must underpin this. That abuses have occurred must be acknowledged. Our governement is living in its own little world if it doesn’t wish to strive for this.

Azhari Aiyub

Director of Tikar Pandan

Founding Member of Aceh Human Rights Museum

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You can visit the Aceh Human Rights Museum online at: <http://museumhamaceh.org/>.