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# “WE BUILD OUR OWN STORIES”: THE 19TH-CENTURY FIGURE AND 21ST-CENTURY MYTH OF THE ACEHNESE POET DÔKARIM

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## Introduction

Since 2005 I have been studying Aceh’s post-conflict and post-tsunami recovery with an ethnographic focus on the Indonesian staff members who work for international humanitarian organizations and local civil society organizations.<sup>1</sup> In this

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essay, I introduce a group of cultural activists from an NGO based in Banda Aceh called the Tikar Pandan Community. This collective of writers and artists uses the late nineteenth-century Acehnese bard poet Teungku Abdul Karim, known popularly in his time as Dôkarim, as a symbolic mascot that has served as a source of inspiration for their literary and activist productions for more than a decade.



Figure 1. Portrait of Dôkarim from Snouck Hurgronje's *The Acehnese* Vol. 2, 100.

Tikar Pandan's strategic use of an obscure historical figure like Dôkarim establishes a particular artistic and political genealogy for their organization. To trace and explore this genealogy, I begin this essay with an account of Dôkarim's artistic legacy as the composer of an oral epic saga titled *Hikayat Prang Gômpeuni*, or The Song of the Dutch War. Then I introduce the Tikar Pandan Community and explain how this group of

civil society activists has revived Dôkarim as a mythical and cautionary figure that inspires their critical cultural productions in present-day Aceh. I conclude with some reflections on the precarious position of cultural brokers such as Dôkarim and the Tikar Pandan activists, and Aceh's civil society in general. Taking a lesson from Dôkarim's fate, the Tikar Pandan Community has chosen a more critical and evasive stance as it deals with patron figures who would seek to co-opt them or sell them out.

### Dôkarim and "The Song of the Dutch War"

What little we know about Dôkarim comes from the Dutch scholar-official Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje's colonial ethnology reports, researched and written with the goal of helping the Dutch pacify Acehese resistance and consolidate Dutch colonial rule.<sup>2</sup> Snouck Hurgronje documents Dôkarim's many talents as an illiterate composer and traveling performer of oral epic poetry. Dôkarim also led local dance troupes and was in demand as a wedding master-of-ceremonies, which in those days required considerable extemporaneous rhetorical skills in Aceh's poetic traditions. But Dôkarim was most famous for composing and performing the *Hikayat Prang Gômpeuni*. Dôkarim's performances were flexible and subject to constant revision, tailored for his audiences in every situation, not least because the war was ongoing as he traveled and performed across the countryside. Even Snouck Hurgronje acknowledges that "the events of which [Dôkarim] sings have not yet reached their final development, so he keeps on adding, as occasion arises, fresh episodes to his poem."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Snouck Hurgronje captured one version of Dôkarim's poem when he commissioned a transcription of all 3,128 verses, noting that "until I had it taken down from the poet's lips, there was not a single copy extant in writing."<sup>4</sup>

G. W. J. Drewes describes two kinds of Acehese literature from the time of the Dutch War.<sup>5</sup> The first uses scriptural justifications and eschatological discourse to urge listeners to join the holy war, and promises martyrdom for the fallen. (The iconic example is the famous *Hikayat Prang Sabi*, or Song of the Holy War, which has been subject to generations of analysis.)<sup>6</sup> The second genre depicts everyday scenes of war,

<sup>2</sup> Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *The Acehese Volume I* and *The Acehese Volume II*, ed. Richard James Wilkinson and trans. A. W. S. O'Sullivan (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1906). See vol. 2, 100–17, for background on Dôkarim and a narrative summary of the *Hikayat Prang Gômpeuni*.

<sup>3</sup> Snouck Hurgronje, *The Acehese Vol. II*, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> G. W. J. Drewes, *Two Acehese Poems: Hikajat Ranto and Hikajat Teungku Die Meuke'* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980), 50, as cited in Edwin Wieringa, "The Dream of the King and the Holy War against the Dutch: The *Kôteubah* of the Acehese Epic, *Hikayat Prang Gômpeuni*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 61, no. 2 (1998): 298–308.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Teuku Ibrahim Alfian, "Aceh and the Holy War (Prang Sabi)," in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 109–20; H. T. Damsté, "Hikajat Prang Sabi," *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde* [Journal of the humanities and social sciences of Southeast Asia] 84, no. 1 (1928): 545–609; G. W. J. Drewes, *Two Acehese Poems*; Amirul Hadi, "Exploring Acehese Understandings of Jihad: A Study of Hikayat Prang Sabi," in *Mapping the Acehese Past*, eds. R. Michael Feener, Patrick Daly, and Anthony Reid (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011), 183–98; Hardiansyah, "Ontologi Hikayat Prang Sabi," *Substantia* 12, no. 2 (2010): 329–42; Ali Hasjmy, *Kebudayaan Aceh Dalam Sejarah* (Jakarta: Penerbit Beuna, 1983), 410–18; Margaret Kartomi, "Toward a Methodology of War and Peace Studies in Ethnomusicology: The Case of Aceh, 1976–2009," *Ethnomusicology* 54, no. 3 (2010): 452–83; David Kloos, "Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia" (PhD Dissertation, VU University Amsterdam, 2013), 29–62; and

and Drewes places Dôkarim's *Hikayat Prang Gômpeuni* in this latter category, though Edwin Wieringa argues that Dôkarim was clearly well versed in the first, as his translations from the poem's Introduction, cited below, attest.<sup>7</sup> Snouck Hurgronje's summary of the *Hikayat Prang Gômpeuni* focuses on Dôkarim's glorification of a series of Acehese warriors and their great deeds, especially of the famous resistance leader and national hero Teuku Umar. But Dôkarim also recounts specific details of behind-the-scenes political negotiations, internal power struggles among the resistance, economic hardship, and community devastation brought by the war. The following verses, translated from Acehese into Indonesian, narrate scenes of war from the perspective of ordinary people, and they bear remarkable resemblance to scenes from Aceh's recent separatist conflict with Indonesia (1976–2005).<sup>8</sup> This first stanza relates the experience of forced displacement during the war:

At mid-day the commander retreated, the Dutch burned the village of Lam Ara  
 For seven days it burned continuously, all the people fled to the mountain  
 They sat together in groups, the men and women, in Mount Batok  
 They sat there in confusion, wondering with whom they might seek shelter  
 Each with their own families, only their weeping could be heard  
 "Alas dear brother, our protector, to where shall we all run?"  
 "We flee westward, in agreement with mother"  
 Some went to the east, others to the west, separating mothers and  
 children all over.<sup>9</sup>

The second stanza reports the strict Dutch surveillance of markets that constrained the local wartime economy:

The village heads all agreed to assemble before the Overlord  
 They arrived in a crowd, to face the Dutch authority  
 "We beg your attention Great Master, why confiscate but a piece of sarong  
 cloth?"  
 "I forbid you to buy a lot, I fear you will sell it to the outsiders

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James T. Siegel, *Shadow and Sound: The Historical Thought of a Sumatran People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 29–66.

<sup>7</sup> Wieringa, "The Dream of the King and the Holy War against the Dutch," 307.

<sup>8</sup> H. Rusdi Sufi et al., *Aceh Tanah Rencong* (Yogyakarta: Solusindo Press and Pemerintah Provinsi Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, 2008). Curiously, the authors of this government-sponsored treatise on Aceh's long history of resistance to foreign invaders do not cite a source manuscript for these translated verses. Nevertheless, a few verses from the first stanza quoted below bear a close resemblance to those cited in Imran T. Abdullah, "Ulama Dan Hikayat Perang Sabil Dalam Perang Belanda Di Aceh," *Jurnal Humaniora* 12, no. 3 (2000): 239–52, which cites as its source *Hikayat Prang Gômpeuni*, Cod. Or. 8039 UBL.

<sup>9</sup> "Waktu lohor panglima undur, Belanda membakar kampung Lam Ara / Tujuh hari dibakar terus, rakyat mengungsi ke gunung semua / Rakyat terduduk berkelompok-kelompok, di Gunung Batok pria wanita / Mereka terduduk kebingungan, hendak menumpang pada siapa / Masing-masing dengan keluarganya, hanya sedu-sedan terdengar nyata / 'Duhai kakanda gantungan kami, ke mana lari kita semua?' / 'Kita mengungsi ke jurusan barat, bermufakat dengan bunda' / Ada yang ke timur atau ke barat, bercerai-berai anak dan bunda." Sufi et al., *Aceh Tanah Rencong*, 12 (English translations by the author).

If just a piece of sarong cloth, a bit of tobacco, for your necessities are just fine  
 But chiefs buying five cloth spindles require an affidavit  
 Beware if without a letter, I will bundle you all into jail."  
 Some would wrap the cloth around their stomachs, in order to deceive the eyes  
 If the overseer caught on, they would never escape, arrested immediately  
 Goods and people gathered together, herded into the office at once  
 There they were then interrogated, their guilt and penalties determined  
 The police would take them away quickly into custody  
 Some were sentenced for five days, while others even got three months.<sup>10</sup>

Acehnese *hikayat* (literally, stories) often feature the poet as a character within the poem who not only introduces the story but interrupts the story as well to comment on it or summarize lessons for the audience, all within the proscribed metrical conventions of the *hikayat* poetic genre. In the Introduction (*kôteuba*) to The Song of the Dutch War, Dôkarim begins by describing the king's prophetic dream and its apocalyptic interpretation by his scholars, an opening scene that borrows directly from an earlier epic poem titled *Hikayat Pocut Muhamat* (The Tale of Pocut Muhamat).<sup>11</sup> After twenty-six verses about the king's prophetic dream, Dôkarim abruptly announces that he is changing the subject, "Praise and glory be unto God. Now I am going to tell a story about the Holy War."<sup>12</sup> But before he begins telling stories about the Dutch War, he inserts a sermon (*khutba*) of his own. He exhorts his audience to join in the holy war against the Dutch with visions of paradise for martyrs and hell fires for those who do not heed the warning foretold in the king's dream. He ends with a final warning: "Please listen, dear younger brothers, they will put chains to your thighs. / Perhaps, just like that, without reason, they will bring you all to Batavia," then explicitly signals the end of the Introduction in order to talk about himself:

Now the Introduction is finished.

Others are absorbed in their military operations, but I, I only compose verses, one line at a time.

I compose verses in my heart. For five years I have been forever busy thinking them out.

<sup>10</sup> "Semufakat kepala kampung, mereka berhimpun pada Tuan Besar / Mereka datang berbondong-bondong, menghadap penguasa Belanda / 'Mohon perhatian Tuan Besar, sehelai sarung mengapa disita?' / 'Kularang yang membeli banyak, takut kau jual pada orang luar / Kalau sehelai sarung, sedikit tembakau, untuk keperluan dapat saja / Hulubalang lima gelondong kain, surat keterangan harus ada / Awas jika tak ada surat, kuikat masuk penjara.' / Ada yang lilitkan kain di perut, supaya dapat mengelabui mata / Jika ketahuan pada pengawas, takkan lepas, ditahan segera / Barang dan orang dikumpulkan, digelandang ke kantor segera / Di sana lalu diperiksa, ditetapkan hukuman kesalahannya / Polisi menariknya cepat-cepat, ke dalam tutupan lalu dibawa / Ada yang dihukum lima hari, yang tiga bulan juga ada," *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> A complete translation of the *Hikayat Pocut Muhamat* can be found in Siegel, *Shadow and Sound*, 33–160. Dôkarim's replication of the king's prophetic dream from the *Hikayat Pocut Muhamat* is noted first by Snouck Hurgronje, *The Achenese Vol. II*, 103, n. 2; and elaborated upon further in Wieringa, "The Dream of the King and the Holy War against the Dutch," 300–303.

<sup>12</sup> Wieringa, "The Dream of the King and the Holy War against the Dutch," 303.

One night I was not able to catch any sleep, I intended to recite a story.

The name of my village is the VI Mukims, Teungku Dôkarim is from Keutapang Dua.<sup>13</sup>

I focus on Wieringa's analysis of the Introduction to Dôkarim's only surviving version of his poetry to establish some of the flexible conventions of Malay authorship and citational practices that has been a source of playful inspiration for the Tikar Pandan Community. But first, a few final words on Dôkarim's fate.

Dôkarim earned his reputation for hailing the heroic deeds of the rebel leader Teuku Umar, who was one of Dôkarim's most generous patrons. Ironically, according to Snouck Hurgronje's account, in the end it was Teuku Umar who ordered Dôkarim's execution in September 1897 on the grounds that Dôkarim had acted as a guide to Dutch troops.<sup>14</sup> Teuku Umar's betrayal is especially unsettling because he himself had pretended to "defect" to the Dutch two times as a means of learning more about them behind enemy lines. Teuku Umar's defections were the inverse of Snouck Hurgronje's ethnographic work among the Acehnese. We know, for example, that Snouck Hurgronje converted to Islam and established rapport with the Acehnese in order to provide strategic intelligence for the Dutch war effort. Teuku Umar and Snouck Hurgronje were both, in a sense, double agents. And they both patronized Dôkarim, although we have no concrete historical data that explains his reasons for serving either one. Bearing in mind the Acehnese oral traditions that shaped Dôkarim as a poet, we should carefully interpret both the transcription of *The Song of the Dutch War* commissioned by Snouck Hurgronje, and Teuku Umar's reported accusations against Dôkarim, as only partial narratives. We will never know who really killed Dôkarim, or why, but it is interesting that neither of Dôkarim's patrons extend the same strategic double agent motive to their mutual client, who never had the opportunity to "finish" his epic.<sup>15</sup> He is simply a traitor.

To illustrate this historical allegory, Figure 2 shows a triangle of double agents, wherein Snouck Hurgronje, Teuku Umar, and Dôkarim each play important roles as brokers between (and surely within) three sides: the Dutch military and colonial administration, Aceh's political and religious elite, and Acehnese communities. Snouck Hurgronje's scholarly work for the colonial government is widely credited with finally turning Dutch military fortunes around in Aceh, while Teuku Umar is celebrated as a national Indonesian hero for his leadership in Aceh's resistance against the Dutch.<sup>16</sup> I put Dôkarim at the bottom of the triangle because his execution, for whatever reason, reminds us that cultural brokers without protection occupy a vulnerable and ambiguous position subject to the capricious political elites above them. I spend the remainder of this article showing how Dôkarim's fate at the hands of his hero and benefactor also provides the Tikar Pandan Community with a cautionary parable that guides its ambivalent attitude toward political alliances with figures in government and other civil society organizations.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 298–300, 307. English translations by Wieringa.

<sup>14</sup> Snouck Hurgronje, *The Acehnese Vol. II*, 101, n. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>16</sup> See the Indonesian Ministry of Social Affairs registry of national heroes, "*Daftar Nama Pahlawan Nasional Republik Indonesia*," at <http://www.kemsos.go.id/modules.php?name=Pahlawan&opsi=mulai-1>, accessed on October 24, 2014.

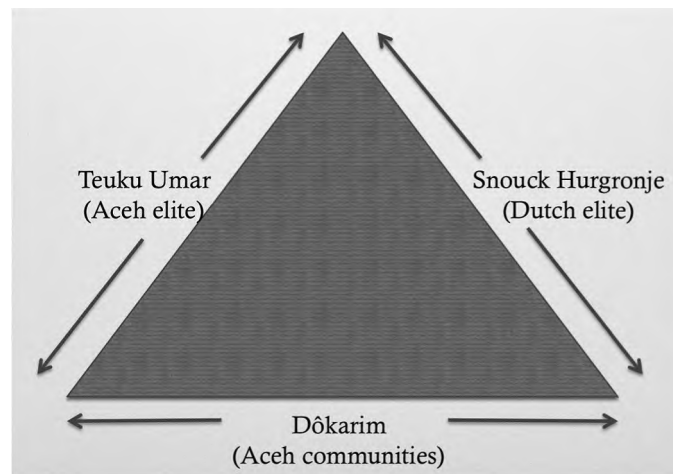


Figure 2. A Triangle of Double Agents (author's figure)

### Tales from a Coffee Shop

I first decided to look into Dôkarim's history and biography when I came across a quotation attributed to him at the beginning of a short essay published in the national magazine *Gatra* with the title *Hikayat Dari Kedai Kopi* (Tale from a Coffee Shop) and written by one of Tikar Pandan's founding members, Reza Idria. The epigram by Dôkarim reads "These are bad times for the mind and imagination / So we build our own stories."<sup>17</sup> Not unlike Aceh's oral traditions, Reza inserts himself into the narrative at the beginning of his essay by announcing "This time I will tell a story about my friend Murtadha, affectionately called Todhak. I am sure that as I am writing this, he is sitting and sipping a coffee at a shop in front of Banda Aceh's great Baiturrahman Mosque." What follows in Reza's six-hundred-word essay is a touching meditation upon the coffee shop as a resilient Acehenese institution, as durable as the mosque Todhak sits in front of, capable of surviving decades of conflict and the tsunami. "Trust me," Reza attests, "after the infamous rogues have burned them down or after the recent tsunami's pounding waves, the very first places to rebuild and receive visitors here are the coffee shops." Reza's characterization of Todhak is at once a satirical and sympathetic rendering of the stock (male) figure in Aceh who sits lazily all day at the coffee shop and criticizes everything outside. Todhak is arrested by history, disadvantaged during the conflict era, and unable to pursue a higher education, which in turn prevents him from getting a job in the lucrative post-tsunami and post-conflict humanitarian reconstruction efforts going on all around him. A fixture at the coffee shop since the conflict, Todhak would sit "with chest pounding, watching army trucks pass by; now [he] admires the luxury cars whose taxes were paid to the neighboring province."<sup>18</sup> Whenever he hears about the outrageous salaries that humanitarian and NGO workers earn, the news is so bitter that Todhak must add more spoonfuls of sugar to his coffee. He sits there anxious and jealous, but the unchanging and familiar

<sup>17</sup> "Ini zaman buruk bagi pikiran dan imajinasi, / maka kami membangun cerita sendiri." Reza Idria, "Hikayat Dari Kedai Kopi," *Suplemen the Wahid Institute Edisi XII, Majalah Gatra*, September 28, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Reza here refers to all the NGO vehicles that were purchased in Medan, the capital city of Aceh's neighboring province to the south, North Sumatra. The tax revenues from vehicle sales support North Sumatra, but the vehicles drive on Aceh's roads. Reza taps into a prevailing critique that Aceh's economy has long been subservient to the Medan markets that effectively control the northern half of Sumatra.

certainty of Aceh's coffee shops invites Todhak to remain. At the end of his essay, Reza concludes:

Todhak (and I as well) may be among those who are struggling with the rapid pace and multiplicity of changes here. For too long we have passed our lives amidst arresting times. We cannot celebrate with a feast after disaster. Instead we must tremble and shudder, over and over again, and look for spaces to build our own stories.

When I met Reza in January 2012 to learn more about the Tikar Pandan Community and their use of Dôkarim as a source of literary inspiration, we met—appropriately enough—at Solong, one of Banda Aceh's most famous coffee shops, in the Ulee Kareng neighborhood. During Aceh's reconstruction heyday, Solong had a geography of seating that was easy to grasp after a few visits. Newcomers, officials, older men, and formal groups typically sat in the front hall with the marble tabletops. Large groups of friends, students, and academics enjoyed sitting in the back room, which opens up into a backyard where all the NGO activists and journalists would sit under tents and zinc-roof shelters at the edges of a parking lot. Upon arrival at Solong with friends, we made a beeline straight through the front hall past the back room and into the backyard. We knew where to find Reza.

When he was still a college student at Aceh's Ar-Raniry State Islamic Institute (now a university), Reza and a young writer named Azhari cofounded the Tikar Pandan Community (*Komunitas Tikar Pandan*) in 2002, during Indonesia's so-called reform era. At a time when dozens of newly established civil society organizations in Aceh—dedicated to exposing the human rights abuses of the Suharto era, providing humanitarian assistance to conflict victims, and agitating for independence through non-violent means via referendum—were increasingly under threat of closure and violence as President Megawati Sukarnoputri's administration moved toward imposing martial law, Tikar Pandan decided that the safest way to launch a protest against political violence in Aceh was through an idiom of cultural critique.<sup>19</sup> This was a clever tactic on their part. Tikar Pandan activists understood that the organs of the Indonesian state purveyed a particularly hollow but effective discourse on culture, developed and perfected during Suharto's New Order to reduce and neutralize regional, ethnic, or religious identities into fixed and subordinated "traditions," manipulable rosters of dress, performance, cuisine, etc., that can be mobilized and quoted on an as-needed basis without threatening the state's singular authority over its citizens.<sup>20</sup> As a self-declared culture organization, the Tikar Pandan Community appears not to threaten established order, starting with their humble and innocuous

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Articles 2.1 and 2.2 of Megawati's Presidential Decree Number 43, "Control of the Activities of Foreign Citizens, Non-Governmental Organizations, and Journalists in the Province of Aceh," issued on June 16, 2003 (original Bahasa Indonesia text available at [http://portal.mahkamahkonstitusi.go.id/eLaw/mg58ufsc89hrsg/keppres43\\_2003.pdf](http://portal.mahkamahkonstitusi.go.id/eLaw/mg58ufsc89hrsg/keppres43_2003.pdf), accessed on August 27, 2014). For a comprehensive account of Aceh's civil society under pressure during the reform era until just before the tsunami, see: Shane Barter, *Neither Wolf nor Lamb: Embracing Civil Society in the Aceh Conflict* (Bangkok: Forum Asia, 2004). Barter translates Articles 2.1 and 2.2 of the decree thus: "Non-governmental organizations, whether foreign or Indonesian, are forbidden from carrying out activities that are incompatible with the implementation of the objectives of the Military State of Emergency in Aceh Province. Humanitarian aid that comes from friendly countries, world bodies, and non-governmental organizations, whether foreign or national, in Aceh province will be coordinated by the State Coordinating Minister for Public Welfare."

<sup>20</sup> John Pemberton, *On the Subject of "Java"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).



name. Translated into English, a *tikar pandan* is a plaited or woven mat made with dried pandanus leaves, a common and multipurpose handicraft used in households, mosques, and other communal spaces for sitting, sleeping, or prayer. When guests arrive, hosts open up their *tikar* for all to sit. As a name for their organization, the image of the *tikar* signifies rural Aceh's tradition, simplicity, utility, and hospitality. But anyone who reads Tikar Pandan's vision and mission statements on its website will detect the philosophical traces of Antonio Gramsci and other cultural critics to, first, generate critical awareness among the Acehnese people about cultural hegemony and structural oppression; and, second, create, with support from Aceh's civil society, an emancipatory culture in Aceh based on principles of social justice.<sup>21</sup> One of Tikar Pandan's achievements before the humanitarian encounter was the publication in 2004 of Azhari's award-winning anthology of short stories, titled *Perempuan Pala* (Nutmeg Woman), which depicts aspects of everyday life during Aceh's military occupation, including one abstract and eerily prophetic piece titled "*Air Raya*" (The Great Water) that uses the metaphor of Noah's flood to describe the condition of a mother and her son after her husband has gone missing.<sup>22</sup> In short, an ethos of cultural resistance permeates all of Tikar Pandan's activities and publications, to draw attention to everyday and taken-for-granted forms of cultural hegemony in Aceh. Reza's "Tale from a Coffee Shop" exemplifies Tikar Pandan's ethos by relating the militaristic oppression of the conflict era to the oligarchic oppression of the humanitarian era from the perspective of regular coffee shop patrons who are left paralyzed by the scenes that pass before them.

### The 21st-century Myth of Dôkarim

Fauzan Santa, the director of Tikar Pandan's Dôkarim Writing School, reckons that before the school revived his name, most people in Aceh involved in arts, literature, or history had never heard of Dôkarim. At most, he joked, they may have heard of Dôkarim as the Aceh War's "most crazy man."<sup>23</sup> When Azhari, Fauzan, and Reza opened up the writing school for young adults in 2003, they scanned Dôkarim's nineteenth-century portrait from Snouck Hurgronje's book, cropped a circle around his magnified grainy face, and turned it into Tikar Pandan's logo in both standard and playful contexts. As of this writing (in mid-2014), Dôkarim has become the iconic face of the Tikar Pandan Community, and his name signifies a commitment to Aceh's artistic traditions from the ground up.

During Aceh's humanitarian encounter, Tikar Pandan took advantage of the donor-driven economy to seek support for developing their small community into a more widespread Tikar Pandan Community Culture League (*Liga Kebudayaan Komunitas Tikar Pandan*). Reza used the word "cells" to describe their approach to this league of organizations:

We asked, and tried to imagine, how do we build a cultural movement? We found it difficult to find other people that understand our ideas about cultural

<sup>21</sup> Komunitas Tikar Pandan, <http://www.tikarpandan.org>, accessed on October 17, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Azhari, *Perempuan Pala* (Yogyakarta: AKY Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication via Facebook on 27 August 2014.

emancipation. So we split up into cells. We have a writing school. We opened a bookstore. We started a journal. We opened an art gallery [which provides space that is also used for film festivals, lectures, and performances]. Each has their own name, their own organization, and their own projects. It looks like a large league, but we are only two people! [laughs] It's a deliberate strategy. Are we cultural critics, writers, activists, poets, teachers, artists? You can't figure us out.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 3. Dôkarim "Reborn" in the 21st Century (author's photo)

Reza exaggerates only a little. The Tikar Pandan Community has worked with multiple cohorts of students, producing a substantial network among Aceh's young writers and activists. But an examination of each of the cells Reza described reveals that the same core group of three or four men's names appear repeatedly on each organization's masthead. They assigned Dôkarim's name to their first cell, the Dôkarim Writing School. In a subsequent email exchange with Reza on October 10, 2012, I asked him why.

We chose Dôkarim as the name for our creative writing school because his name is easy to remember and his role during the colonial war still needs more exploration. Dôkarim is a representative figure that supports our goal of combining writing and traditional storytelling as the basis of our writing school's curriculum. It followed that we then gave the same name to our bookstore, Dôkarim Book Store.

The Tikar Pandan Culture League started the *Jurnal Kebudayaan Gelombang Baru* (New Wave Culture Journal). It opened a multi-purpose space in the Ulee Kareng neighborhood called Episentrum that has been used for film series, art shows,

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Reza Idria, January 2012, Banda Aceh.

performances, book readings, lectures, and discussions.<sup>25</sup> The Metamorfosa Institute is a research organization that focuses on social, cultural, and political issues. Results from Metamorfosa's research serve as a source of information and inspiration for Tikar Pandan's other cells, including contributions to the New Wave Culture Journal. Tikar Pandan also started a publishing house, Aneuk Mulieng Publishing. The proceeds from the Dôkarim Book Store and Aneuk Mulieng Publishing support the league's other activities. In June 2011, the Tikar Pandan Culture League added another cell into its network, a Peace and Human Rights Museum that documents the abuses perpetrated against civilians during the conflict.<sup>26</sup> With a small grant from the International Center for Transitional Justice, activists from Tikar Pandan and a few other local NGOs opened the museum (Reza is the museum's director) without any support from the national or provincial government. The museum's very existence has served as a public rebuke against the national and provincial governments, and the former Free Aceh Movement separatists, for collectively refusing to honor provisions for a post-conflict truth and reconciliation commission as called for in both the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding that brought an end to the conflict and the National Law on the Governance of Aceh (No. 6, 2006) that codified the provisions of the Helsinki agreement into law.

As the Tikar Pandan Culture League has grown, the figure of Dôkarim has assumed the status of a myth. Beyond the writing school and book store, Reza told me: "Fauzan and I have produced a lot of slogans and pamphlets using Dôkarim's name, and, of course, some people believe that the words really came from Dôkarim. One might say that we created a myth about Dôkarim for our own purposes." I asked Reza to clarify what it means to create a myth for their own purposes, and then asked if Reza was saying that he essentially invented the quotation about building "our own stories" that he attributes to Dôkarim at the beginning of "Tale from a Coffee Shop"?

[chuckling] Ha ha; yes, Jesse, we were making it up and attributing it to Dôkarim. We have nothing to read of his work except a few sections of his Song of the Dutch War. We have created a lot of advertisements that we place in newspapers and billboards to introduce our bookstore and the writing school. We use old Indonesian spelling (*ejaan lama*) and look for words in old Malay to give our Dôkarim quotes the appearance of authenticity.<sup>27</sup>

So, for example, in an advertisement for the Dôkarim Book Store, the tagline quote attributed to Dôkarim reads, in old Indonesian spelling, "*akoe batja maka akoe ada, akoe tak batja maka akoe mengada-ada*" (I read therefore I am, I do not read therefore I am faking it), which makes a triple play on Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, Dôkarim's reported illiteracy, and the doubling of the verb to be (*ada*) into the verb to fake, make up, or dissimulate (*mengada-ada*). On the Dôkarim Book Store's Facebook page, Fauzan routinely contributes fake Dôkarim adages as status updates in between other announcements and advertisements such as the following: "*Andjing lijar jang soeka menjalak, setelah diberi toelang ia-nja akan toendoek pada toewan, mendjilat-nja poen paleng*

<sup>25</sup> Episentrum has since moved across to the other side of Banda Aceh, in the neighborhood of Geuceu Menara.

<sup>26</sup> Museum Ham Aceh, <http://museumhamaceh.org/>, accessed August 26, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Personal email communication between the author and Reza Idria, October 10, 2012.

*basah*" (A stray dog that likes to bark, after given a bone, will submit to its master, with even a slobbering kiss). Reza alerted me to another example.

Another way that we have developed the Dôkarim myth is through UN-DôC. Look at my pictures on Facebook from the first-year anniversary of the Human Rights Museum. You will find Dôkarim's face in front of the podium where I gave my speech [see photo, next page]. If one does not pay close attention, it looks like any of the United Nations logos, but it is actually our own Dôkarim logo that we called UN-DôC, the United Nothing for Dôkarim Committee. It's our satire about the presence of so many UN organizations in Aceh after the tsunami, when everyone seemed to be in love with working for the UN, because it pays a high salary and confers prestige (*gengsi*); we mock these people with UN-DôC in our presence.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 4. The Director of the Peace and Human Rights Museum, Reza Idria, speaks at an event celebrating the museum's first-year anniversary. In front of the podium, Dôkarim's face adorns a logo for a fake United Nations member organization: UN-DôC, the United Nothing for Dôkarim Committee. (Photo by Reza Idria, used with permission)

Dôkarim liberally quoted from the *Hikayat Pocut Muhamat* in his Introduction to the *Hikayat Prang Gômpeuni*, partly to establish his lineage among the epic bard poets of Aceh that preceded him; Dôkarim established, so to speak, his inheritance of a poetic license. To my surprise and delight, I learned that the Tikar Pandan Culture League has taken, in their turn, poetic license with Dôkarim's literary legacy as well, creating supplementary Dôkarim myths that suit their own purposes.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

### Tikar Pandan and the Refusal of Authority

The Tikar Pandan Culture League did not categorically oppose the presence of international humanitarian organizations in Aceh during the reconstruction era. The league has been the recipient of generous funding from international donors such as The Asia Foundation, the Netherlands Embassy, The Japan Foundation, and the European Commission, among others. Rather, it critiqued the inequalities that the humanitarian encounter has produced in Aceh, the misallocations and questionable priorities of reconstruction budgets, the pseudo-veneer of community participation in reconstruction projects, and the outright corruption that siphons so much aid money away from its intended targets. For this, Tikar Pandan reserved their harshest critique for BRR (*Badan Rehabilitasi & Rekonstruksi NAD-Nias*, the Aceh-Nias Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency), the temporary (2005–09) Indonesian ministry whose outsized staff salaries made Todhak so bitter in Reza's "Tale from a Coffee Shop" that he was compelled to add more and more sugar to his coffee. In March 2009, as BRR wrapped up its mission and a rash of self-congratulatory closing ceremonies were planned, the Tikar Pandan Culture League issued a sharp, sarcastic "Manifesto of Great Sadness" directed at the civil society organizations in Aceh that joined together to give Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, the minister of BRR and a close confidante of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a gift as a symbol of gratitude for his patronage:

In response to the giving of gifts from a number of Aceh's civil society organizations to Master [*Tuan*] Kuntoro and his [BRR] Empire, The Tikar Pandan Aceh Community Culture League hereby declares:

1. That the Tikar Pandan Community Culture League is not included in such an alliance!
2. That the Tikar Pandan Community Culture League will never regard the BRR Empire as valuable for Aceh's tsunami victims, much less give those gangsters an award!
3. That the Tikar Pandan Community Culture League is *the only formal institution* that has refused offers to receive assistance and has never been included in a list of *beneficiaries of assistance* from the Cultural Affairs Deputy or any of the other deputies within BRR since its beginning and until its end.

—Ulee Kareng, March 24, 2009<sup>29</sup>

In my larger examination of international humanitarian agencies and their encounters with local civil society organizations in post-conflict Aceh, I use James T. Siegel's theoretical framework of "recognition" to ask whether and how middle-class Acehnese humanitarian workers come to identify as Indonesian once again after so many years of brutal counter-insurgency operations in Aceh cut them off from the usual trajectories (e.g., national education, civil or military service, and civil society organizations) that confer attributes of national citizenship.<sup>30</sup> Siegel argues that in

<sup>29</sup> Koumunitas Tikar Pandan, Manifesto Sedih Besar, <http://www.tikarpandan.org/2009/08/manifesto-sedih-besar.html> (emphasis in original, translation by author), accessed on October 18, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> For the historical origins and definition of Siegel's larger argument, see: James T. Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). For a specific discussion of how recognition fails in the context of Aceh during the height of counterinsurgency operations, see: James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 336–422.

Aceh, and in Indonesia more broadly, the recognition of self and of one's social identity must come from an external source of authority that supplements the subject and thereby reveals an identity that was inherent to the subject all along. This form of recognition necessarily embraces an impulse toward hierarchy given its reliance upon an external authority as recognition's agent, and I argue that some people involved in Aceh's humanitarian encounter discovered a source of recognition in the foreign, temporary agents of humanitarianism, and in the reassertion and resumption of state authority.<sup>31</sup>

Not so, however, with the cultural activists of Tikar Pandan. On the list of authoritative agents that would reintroduce hierarchy following the "democratic catastrophe" of the tsunami, whether it's the international humanitarian agencies and their donors, Indonesia's central government in Jakarta and its more proximate manifestation as BRR, or Aceh's provincial government now run largely by former separatists from the Free Aceh Movement, the Tikar Pandan Culture League refuses all of the above.<sup>32</sup> The Tikar Pandan founders' recourse to Dôkarim as an ambiguous and cautionary authorizing figure who substitutes for the UN, the iconic institution of international humanitarian assistance, appears to me to be an attempt to reconstitute Aceh's civil society while also refusing—to the extent that they are able—the reassertion of hierarchy by dangerous double agents in power who might double-cross them, just as Snouck Hurgronje betrayed the confidence of the Acehnese, and just as Teuku Umar betrayed the confidence of Dôkarim.

Tikar Pandan's critical wariness toward authority figures has resulted in an organizational structure—a "rhizomatic" league of cells—that strategically and partially evades recognition by Aceh's authoritative agents that would reintroduce hierarchy. As Reza told me, "You can't figure us out." The rhizome model, as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, resists hierarchical organizational structures (using arboreal root-tree systems as the contrasting model), features multiple points of entry and exit into the system that may connect with any other point, survives points of rupture, defies meaningful enumeration or chronology, and tactically adapts to the fixed arboreal systems that structure its environment.<sup>33</sup> The surrounding presence of hierarchical structures is an important point that suggests Tikar Pandan could not possibly proliferate its cells indefinitely in all directions, which is another way of saying that there are severe limits on their capacity to ever realize an emancipatory culture for Aceh. For example, the historical context of human rights abuses perpetrated against civilians by combat groups during the conflict, and the subsequent refusal of either the central or provincial government to address this past, has imposed a set of limits upon Aceh's civil society that in turn compelled Tikar Pandan to establish a Peace and Human Rights Museum. For another example, Tikar Pandan's

<sup>31</sup> For the detailed development of this argument, see Jesse Hession Grayman, "Humanitarian Encounters in Post-Conflict Aceh, Indonesia" (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Department of Anthropology, 2013), ch. 4 and 5.

<sup>32</sup> On the tsunami as a "democratic catastrophe," Siegel writes shortly after the event that the tsunami "was the first democratic natural catastrophe that I know of to have struck Indonesia. Till now, floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes have devastated only the lower classes. Reports show that this time things were different." James T. Siegel, "Peduli Aceh" *Indonesia* 79 (April 2005): 165–67.

<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 3–28.

expansion into a league of culture cells was made possible due to the massive influx of international donors into Aceh during the humanitarian years, allowing Tikar Pandan to amplify and strengthen the reach of its cultural critique. A partial dependence on donor support, and an organizational structure that still requires the charismatic leadership of its original founders to direct the rhizomatic growth of Tikar Pandan's cells, underscores the obvious point that its vision of cultural emancipation serves as an ideological reference point rather than an actual achievable goal.

Whether we talk about the historic figure of Teuku Umar who executed Dôkarim, or Aceh's former separatists who now rule the provincial government and who have consistently rejected the participation of Aceh's civil society during the transition to peace, Aceh's cultural producers and the rest of its civil society must be wary of their leaders. In their own search for recognition, Aceh's leaders alternately collaborate with or rebel against external authorities; in turn, Aceh's leaders exercise their local authority at whim to alternately co-opt or sell-out their constituents. The Tikar Pandan Community's recourse to a more sophisticated evasive strategy of cultural resistance than that which Dôkarim was able to summon for himself in some ways reinforces my tentative conclusion that, in general, Aceh's civil society today finds itself in just as vulnerable a position as Dôkarim was in his time.