This summer, 2013, I visited the place where I was born, on Christmas Eve, 1948: Pladjoe, a suburb of the oil city Palembang in the south of Sumatra. I was surprised to find the compound where we lived more or less intact. Pretty green roofed villas on a green with waving palm trees. What a relief after the bustle of Palembang, ridden with motor scooters and impressive motorcars.

The compound owned 65 years ago by the Dutch oil company, the Bataafse Petroleum Maatschappij, (nationalized in 1957) is now reserved for employees of the Indonesian State oil company, Pertamina. It is still a compound, without free access. I had to hand over my passport at the gate and the guards read ‘place of birth: Pladjoe’. We entered and walked around, admiring the houses and quiet lanes.
Pladjoe now Playu, compound of the BPM now Pertamina, 2013
We were cordially welcomed in the Protestant church, as it was Sunday.

I was requested to join the choir for a photo.
Even more peaceful was the hospital where I was born. One floor high, it was draped around flowery courtyards, with slender pillars painted light blue and light green. A place to be born, a place to die.
This pleasant surprise was contrasted with a shock. During this trip I learned that just before my birth Palembang was the scene of war, war between my country, the Netherlands, and the Indonesian liberation movement. Just after the Netherlands was liberated from the oppression of Hitler regime, it used violence to suppress the liberation of the Indonesian people. The Nazi’s were condemned for their racism. Yet the Dutch colony of Indië was also ruled with a racist principle. The inhabitants were put into categories: ‘inlanders’ ‘indo’s’ with one European parent, and ‘Europeans’. This system was still in place in January 1949 when my father registered me with the Palembang authorities, in the European department.

My parents never told me about the conflict in Palembang. I discovered it bit by bit, via internet and in Palembang itself. There is hardly any information about the conflict between the Dutch and the TNI the nationalists of Sukarno. That in itself is surprising enough. The Indonesians were not equipped to make films of photo’s. From the Dutch side a few images remain, but they don’t give a clear picture of the scale of the Dutch offensives. The Dutch government was at pains to disguise the real scale of its offensive operations, calling the two major operations – Product (spring 1948) and Crow (December 1948) ‘politieele acties’, as if it was just a matter of law and order, policing to catch criminals making a nuisance of themselves. In reality these two operations were large scale offensives, with tens of thousands of men under arms, and heavy weaponry such as tanks and bombers.

The main action in Palembang, however, preceded these official offensives. At the end of 1946 the Dutch took over command from the British, who earlier on had held the Dutch troops back, for fear of clashes with the Nationalists. My father was one of the voluntary service men not allowed back into the country of his birth. Their fear for Dutch –Indonesian clashes, we can now conclude, was well founded. However in 1946 the Dutch government promised to promote Indonesian independence and was allowed to take over the British positions. In preparation for the Dutch return to Sumatra, its largest cities, Palembang and Medan, were bombed.
This allowed the Dutch troops to enter Palembang from the river. Heavy material rolled out of the ships onto Palembang riverside. The Dutch film showing this, also pictures Dutch service men helping citizens clear up the rubble, from Dutch bombings it may be presumed. However at the time there was a ceasefire in place, based on the Linggadjati Agreement of 15 November 1946. In the meantime the Dutch parliament passed a bill on obligatory military service for Dutch conscripts to be sent to ‘Indië’. Those who refused went to jail.

On New Year’s Day 1947 a drunken Ambonese member of the KNIL, the Dutch Royal Indonesian army, fired gun shots into the air. Soldiers of the Republican army took these as offensive and shot back. That was the signal of the Dutch Army to start large scale operations.

All registers were opened, wrote a Dutch spokesman. ”Jan van Trigt, duizenddagenindie.wordpress.com
Not only machineguns and hand grenades but also armored personnel carriers, Humber fighting vehicles, cannon from marine ships on the river Moesi, and B-25 bomber aircraft. According to an Indonesian spokesman there was heavy artillery fire from the river.

Fortified with armored vehicles and advanced tanks the Dutch army invaded and attacked the Indonesian army headquarters in the Palembang Grand Mosque, which the Indonesians defended in the name of Jihad (defensive warfare). This truly was a full scale war, with aircraft, cannon fire artillery and heavy clashes and losses of men. In Palembang it is remembered as the War of Five days and Five Nights.

Dutch offensive, war of five days and five nights, war memorial Palembang
According to an Indonesian description, the Dutch suffered from logistic problems, whilst under attack from all sides by the Indonesian army and the local people. The Indonesian side found support locally and from the region. However The Indonesian side ran out of munitions. So after five days of full scale war a ceasefire was negotiated. A final firing came from a Dutch ship housing military on a group of school children, causing many casualties.
On 5th January the Dutchman concludes: “our demands have been accepted. Long queues of armored vehicles and carriers return. Laughing and singing. All tired, dead tired, but glad with the success. The battle is over and the Indonesians are retreating.”

According to the agreement the Indonesian military were expelled to 20 km from the city. From there, however, they continued guerilla warfare. That led to the region of Palembang becoming one of the targets of the first ‘police action’ Operation Product on 21st July 1947.

One may suppose that by the time my parents came to Pladjo, the region was comparatively quiet. However just before the day of my birth, on Christmas Eve of 1948, the second ‘police action’ operation crow was initiated elsewhere. Its main focus was Yogyakarta, where the Nationalist government had sought refuge when staying in Batavia, when Djakarta became too dangerous.

The Dutch government had been wary to attack the seat of a ‘government with which they were engaged in negotiations. The Dutch military commander Spoor was determined to capture the Nationalist government. By passing the usual lines of command, he wrote a personal letter to the Dutch prime minister, threatening to resign if his advice was not heeded. So on 19th December 1948 the Dutch military captured Yogyakarta and sent the leaders Sukarno and Hatta into exile. The international community had been urging The Netherlands to grant the Indonesians independence. The young Security Council, (which had met for the first time in 1946) held an emergency session on the Indonesian question.

On the 24th December 1948, the day of my birth, it passed the following resolution.

The Security Council,

Noting with concern the resumption of hostilities in Indonesia,

1. Calls upon the parties:  
   (a) To cease hostilities forthwith;  
   (b) Immediately to release the President of the Republic of Indonesia and other political prisoners arrested since 18 December 1948;

As the Dutch had reached their military goals, the military operations were suspended. But the leaders of the Republican government were set free only in May after the USA had threatened to cut the Dutch Marshall aid.
After visiting Pladjo and Palembang nearly 65 years later, we were guests in Yogyakarta. I was invited to speak at the Islamic State University Uin Sunan Kalijaga and at the Center for Religious and Crosscultural Studies Universitas Gadjah Mada. This University was established in Yogya on 19th December 1949, a year after the Dutch took the town and captured the Indonesian leaders.

My subject was common values in Qur’an and Bible, as presented on our website

www.alquranalkitab.net

Muslims and Christians of the alquranalkitab team, Yogyakarta 2013

Obviously these common values include *Damai*, peace.

I felt the urge, when discussing this theme, as a Blanda, a Dutchwoman, to say:

“I’m sorry.”

Which I did.