

THE 2004 TSUNAMI A SURVIVOR'S STORY



Editor's Note: Ari Palawi is a graduate degree fellow in Ethnomusicology at the East-West Center and the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, funded by the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program. During the tsunami in December 2004, he was a lecturer at Syiah Kuala University in Aceh Province, Indonesia. Special thanks go to Terance Bigalke and Barbara Andaya at the East-West Center for obtaining this story.

As recounted to Terance W. Bigalke

My name is Ari Palawi, and I was born on November 10, 1974. I grew up in Banda Aceh, the capital of Nangroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh). Aceh (pronounced Ah-chay) is a special territory (*daerah istimewa*) of Indonesia, located on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra. I finished my elementary, junior high, and senior high school there. In 1993, I went to Java Island to pursue my undergraduate degree at the Yogyakarta Indonesian Institute of Arts where I graduated in 2000. I began working in 2002 as a lecturer at Syiah Kuala University, Banda Aceh. There I taught arts and some music courses.

The moment that changed my life was on the Sunday morning of December 26, 2004. At that time, I still lived in my parents' house at Peurada, about three kilometers from the sea. My room was on the second floor, and my mother's and sister's rooms were on the first floor. Suddenly, a powerful earthquake shook us, and we panicked. Sponta-

neously, I ran as directly as possible to the place my sister took my mother and cousin. We, and people from all over, reached and gathered in a big mosque one kilometer away from the surging seawater. Spontaneously, people recited the Koran and prayed, expecting the worst. Every time the earth shook, the more panic people felt. From the second floor, we could see the water rising higher and higher until it almost entered the yard of the mosque.

After waiting for about five hours, my mother strongly wanted to go back to our house. Our house was still there, but everything inside it had been damaged or was gone. The seawater depth was still about seventy-five centimeters. The mud was about thirty centimeters high. It seemed that the water had reached more than two meters before it went down. While we were in the house, a number of after-shocks occurred. Many times we ran to our neighbor's house which we

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neously, I grabbed my cousin, while shouting to my sister to get out of the house quickly. After getting away from the house, we stood on the street. My mother was still in the garden. I could not reach her immediately because the earth was still shaking. When the shaking stopped for a moment, I was able to get to my mother.

After about thirty minutes, the earthquake stopped. We thought the disaster had ended. All our neighbors and my family returned to our houses. Then, mysteriously, my mother suddenly asked my sister and me to take all of the important documents and move them into my room on the second floor. My confusion about why my mother wanted us to do this was answered within thirty minutes. Hundreds of people were rushing by the street in front of our house, yelling "Air naik! Air naik! Allahuakbar! Allahuakbar! Laillahailallah!" ("The water is rising, the water is rising! God is Great! God is Great! There is no God but God!") These people yelled the phrases over and over, with panic, fear, and terror in their faces.

I got my motorcycle and asked my sister to drive it with my mother and cousin. After that, I locked the doors of the house and the

thought was built stronger and higher. Finally, before nightfall, we went to a mosque in another village. It was quite far from the first mosque where we had stayed during the tsunami.

As a result of the disaster, there was no electricity at all. Villagers around the mosque gave some food and water to hundreds of refugees that stayed in the mosque. Even so, every one patiently kept praying in the mosque during prayer times. No one had enough sleep on that night. Every one was in trauma.

Next day, in the morning, we went back to our house again. The water was not as high as the first day. People tried to identify the dead bodies on the street along the way home. We went back to our home for a whole day to collect any useful things that remained. After securing them in one place, I tried to convince my mother to evacuate to my older sister's house in Blang Bintang, which is about twenty-three kilometers from our house. We stayed in my older sister's house for about one month and half.

Even though I was still very tired and traumatized from the tsunami, on the third day at my sister's house I drove the motorcycle

back to our house in Peurada. By doing so, I could convince my mother not to go back to the house, as she wanted to do. It was very hard on me, being alone in our house in an empty village in such an unpredictable situation. Damage and death were still everywhere. My love for my mother drove me to overcome my fear, and three or four times a day I shuttled back and forth to my sister's house carrying three large sacks of valuables. I was happy to keep my mother so busy cleaning these things that she did not go back to Peurada.

A few weeks before returning to live in our house, we tried to clean and repair it. Meanwhile, in the tsunami aftermath, I focused on organizing friends in my village to get some help for Aceh from government or non-government organizations. As my family did, other people in our village stayed there only during the day and went back to their temporary place at night for food and rest. We saw the mosque as the center to light up peoples' spirits and get help from people—and we received some donations of food, drinks, and even building materials. In one month, relief efforts in our village made rapid progress.

When I was sure that my family's situation was getting better, I refocused my concern on the department where I work. The first time I went back to campus after the tsunami, three of my students were living there temporarily because they had no other place to stay. I advised them to make sure that all their documents, musical instruments, and teaching media were safe and to protect things from being looted. I met some other university representatives to figure out our departmental priorities to enable teaching and learning activities. I was the only lecturer from my department there at the time and had to make the decisions since my other colleagues were not yet back on campus. We received some donations that we used to repair the buildings and buy some materials and equipment. Finally, after several months, the students were able to resume their study. However, the multiple demands we faced in this situation of depleted teaching staff, organizational disarray, and damage to facilities made progress very slow.

As ordinary people, the trauma of the tsunami remains in our memory. Our experience with the tsunami enriches us in the way we think about disasters. For a time, we panicked whenever we felt the aftershocks that continuously occurred during the first year after the disaster. Preparing to minimize the potential damages and trying to make the situation as good as before the disaster are the keys for our mental and psychological recovery. Although we lost a number of our relatives and material possessions, we retained our sense of dignity, social propriety, and our sanity. Compared to other people who lost their parents, their children, and everything they owned, our experience is nothing. I might say that most of the direct victims of the tsunami mentally can accept the realities resulting from the catastrophe. I assume that the revival of religious awareness has been a vital aspect of maintaining our spirit. The extraordinary response from the people around the world is the most significant motivation to keep us active and optimistic, particularly for my family and me. In general, people bounce back from their sadness in a relatively short time.

In the wider-ranging effects, the momentum of the peace agreement between the government of Indonesia and Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) signed in Helsinki made the misery of war become history. The first priority for disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation needs to extend to all sufferers of the

war between GAM and the central government. Nowadays, there are a lot of changes coming about through the relief program in Aceh. Although the program has not stayed on schedule, slowly but surely we see an increasing number of people with new houses to replace what they lost in the tsunami. The city has been cleaned up and the people are intensively working as usual. Welfare and education are two of the most important parts of the recovery program—and they are developing through a hundred local and international funding agencies and NGOs. The successful elections in Aceh, which many people see as a major achievement, especially considering that former GAM leaders were peacefully elected to the governorship and vice governorship, brings new hope for Acehnese that we have reached a solution that will advance Aceh civilization in the future through our own decision-making. We are fulfilling the true determination of the Acehnese struggle through fifty years of war and the great tsunami. However, the transition of shifting more control from Jakarta to the Aceh government is still in progress to reach a win-win solution, and this affects the pace of meeting recovery targets in the relief program in Aceh.

For instance, some recent cases of manipulation of the multi-billion dollar program put the success of the recovery at risk. There are concerns that expenditures are not sufficiently benefiting incomes in the local community, due to too much recruitment by employers from outside the region and an unbalanced focus on certain urban areas in Aceh. The goals of the recovery program are falling short of meeting local needs, particularly in the isolated areas of some Aceh districts. These shortcomings cause the Acehnese to doubt that the rebuilding effort will fully meet their hope to independently develop technology, science, and culture in Aceh.

Politically, the momentum of the peace agreement between the government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement signed in Helsinki on August 15, 2005, has begun to change the way Aceh perceives the Indonesian national government. A larger portion of gas revenue going to Aceh makes an important difference in the provincial economy and improves the prosperity of Acehnese people. However, it will depend on the transparency and accountability of all the authorities and the integrity of people in Aceh. The progress on implementing the Helsinki agreement should be transparent and independently verified. The commitment is crucial to perpetuate the political trust between Aceh and Indonesian Republic authorities, as stated in portions of the agreements. There is also a need to anticipate the possibility of third-party internal or external interests working to undermine the agreement. By walking this path, we will not lose our goals and ideals of the peace agreement that emerged from the monumental history of the 8.9-point earthquake followed by the tsunami on December 26, 2004. Our awareness and responsibility to do this is our appreciation to those who died or are missing because of wars and disasters and who made their own significant contribution to a better Aceh. ■

TERANCE W. BIGALKE is director of the East-West Center Education Program. He has regularly visited Indonesia for more than thirty years, and worked and conducted research there for five years. He was a program officer for education and culture with the Ford Foundation in Jakarta. Bigalke holds a PhD in comparative world history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with a focus on nineteenth and twentieth-century Indonesia, and a Master's Degree in Southeast Asian history from the University of Hawai'i as an East-West Center fellow.