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AUGUSTINUS SUPRATIKNYA

Between a painful blessing
and a curse: The tragedy of
the tsunami is interwoven
with Indonesian politics and
the nation's many tribulations.

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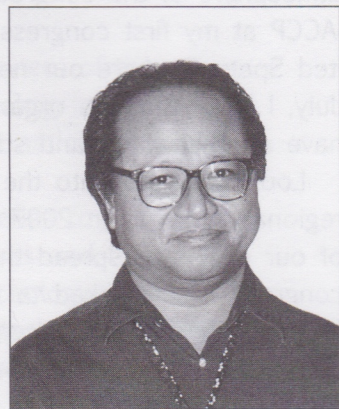
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The Tsunami:

Between a Painful Blessing and a Curse

Augustinus Supratiknya
Yogyakarta, Indonesia

When most of the peoples of the world were celebrating or making their final preparation to celebrate year-end *fiestas*, Christmas, the New Year, or both, some of their brothers and sisters who live around the Gulf of Andaman were struck by one of the worst natural disasters in history—the December 26, 2004 tsunami.

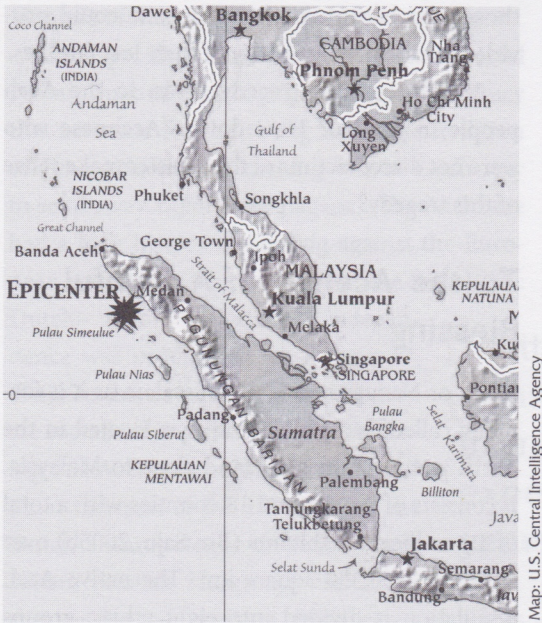


A series of three strong underwater earthquakes at the junction of the Indo-Australian sea plate and the Eurasian continent plate hit west of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam at 7:58 am, near the Andaman Islands at 9:15 am, and near the Nicobar Islands at 9:22 am. The quakes created horrific sea waves of 10-20 meters high, travelling at about 900 km per hour, that swept over several coastal areas in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives.

Tsunami is a Japanese word consisting of *tsu*, which means harbour, and *nami* that means wave. Hence tsunami literally means, "harbour wave." In the last 200 years, 1801-2000, at least 161 tsunamis have occurred around the Indonesian archipelago. The earliest one ever recorded took place on February 17, 1674 in the Banda Sea near West Papua and the Maluku Islands. Despite such a "rich" experience with tsunamis, they are not well documented in Indonesia and are generally unfamiliar to Indonesians. That's why when the sea water suddenly withdrew from the shore following the earthquake on the morning of December 26, 2004, people who reside along the coastal areas in Aceh and West Sumatra were

happily picking up fish that had seemingly miraculously floundered on the sand. They were totally unaware of what was transpiring when, about fifteen minutes later, the sea water surged back to shore in waves of unimaginable height and speed. Everything in their path was swept away, precipitating massive death and destruction in an area of about 10,000 square kilometers. Such an area constitutes about one fifth of the total area of the province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, 50,390 square km. In the two worst affected areas in Aceh, Meulaboh and the provincial capital city of Banda Aceh, the waves intruded 5 and 10 km inland, respectively. At least 166,520 casualties, 394,285 refugees, and uncountable material losses and damages were recorded. Aceh was the worst affected area of the regions along the Gulf of Andaman, which include East Africa, Maldives, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia.

What is the psychological impact on the victims the tsunami, especially the people of Aceh who survived the disaster?



Map: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency

Scene of the tsunami

Suffering: Physical and Psychological Traumas

The direct effects of any disaster on the surviving victims are clearly traumas, both physical and psychological. Patients seen in hospitals around Banda Aceh suffered cuts, wounds, and bone fractures that had become infected and were festering due to delayed proper medical treatment. Many victims, including very young children, bore deep wounds that started producing maggots and a putrid odour. Quite a large number of victims also suffered from internal wounds in their throats, lungs and stomachs due to involuntarily ingesting dirty water and mud (Azis,

2005).

Less salient but no less serious and rampant were the deep psychological traumas the surviving victims experienced due to the extreme panic and fear they felt at the time of the disaster, as well as to their awareness of their sudden loss of both material property and loved ones. Having lost his two-year-old child, his wife, his mother and father, as well as his home and belongings, a young man looked dazed, mute, and petrified with eyes staring blankly. He is now all alone in the world with practically nothing left except the clothes on his back (Sutta Dharmasaputra, 2005). A similar tragedy befell an eight-year-old girl. She was attending a routine Sunday morning physical exercise at her school, located outside the disaster area, when the tsunami struck. Still wearing her exercise suit and looking bewildered, dazed, and depressed, she softly said that her father, mother, brothers and sisters were all dead. No more tears fell on her tiny cheeks (Nur Hidayati, 2005a). Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of men, women and children must have had a similar experience given the magnitude of the death toll and physical destruction. It has been reported that, in the areas that were most seriously hit by the tsunami, about 30 to 60 percent of the inhabitants were dead or missing (Neli Triana, 2005; Dody Wisnu Pribadi, 2005). Not surprisingly, many people in Aceh are now terrified at simply hearing the sound of ocean waves (Hartiningsih, 2005). Some children are afraid of the sound of hard rain and running water so they scream wildly when their parents

About the Author

Augustinus Supratiknya is Associate Professor of Psychology at the Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He is interested in issues related to education, values, as well as self and identity as culturally constructed. He earned his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of the Philippines, Diliman. During 2003-2004, he visited the Center for Cross-Cultural Research, Western Washington University and the School of Psychology, Florida Institute of Technology, as a Fulbright scholar. He served on the Scientific Committee for the 16th International Congress of the IACCP in Yogyakarta (2002). He co-edited the Congress proceedings volume, *Ongoing themes in psychology and culture* (2004).

supratiknya@yahoo.co.uk

give them a bath (Indiasari & Susi Ivvaty, 2005). Some people now avoid watching television due to feeling nauseated by the almost continuous and excessive presentation of death and destruction in the days following the disaster (Pudjias-tuti & Sarie Febriane, 2005).

The massive death toll produced a lot of widows and widowers, and especially orphans. Some estimates indicate that hundreds of thousands of orphan children are in refuge camps around the disaster areas (Indiasari & Susi Ivvaty, 2005). Some of them are as young as 18 months old. They can be classified into three groups: (1) those who are wounded or sick, and hence need immediate medical treatment in addition to the fulfilment of other basic needs; (2) those who are physically healthy and hence need immediate support for the fulfilment of their basic needs, namely food and drink, clothes, and shelter; and (3) those who need help in dealing with psychological trauma and in gaining an education (Hartingsih & Ninuk Mardiana Pambudy, 2005). Some children eventually died in hospitals. Others were brought out of Aceh by strangers for either suspected illegal adoption, or worse, for child trafficking. Hence, both children and other adult victims in various areas around the disaster region were terrified by rumours of child kidnappings.

Older children who were living outside of Aceh, often studying at universities in Java, have been orphaned. Students from throughout Indonesia study in Java's higher quality universities, supported by government scholarships or their own parents and family. Thirty students from Aceh were studying at the state university in Purwokerto, a small city in the Central Java, when the tsunami occurred. Three of them were in their first semester. Never did they suspect that their leave-taking five months earlier would have been forever (Susana Rita, 2005). Hundreds of other Aceh students studying in Java experienced a similar fate. In most cases either the university or the local provincial government took over responsibility for their financial support. But to

those who became orphans, no one could provide the emotional security of their lost families.

What does this tragedy mean to the Aceh people in general? How do the Acehnese who were not direct victims of the disaster make sense of this tragedy?

To the Acehnese: A Painful Blessing

Aceh, or Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam as it is formally called, is a province that is located in the north part of Sumatra Island close to Malaysia. It consists of 3 cities and 18 counties with a total of 4.2 million inhabitants (Bin Saju, 2005b) over an area of 50,390 square km. The native Aceh population is divided into eight ethnic groups including the Aceh, Gayo, Alas, Tamiang, Kenet, Aneuk Jamee, Singkil, and Simileue, each of which includes sub-ethnic groups. As a whole they live peacefully because they share the same

The Acehnese were the first group in the Indonesian archipelago to embrace Islam in the 13th century, a fundamental source of pride among the Acehnese.

religion, Islam. In fact, the Acehnese were the first group in the Indonesian archipelago to embrace Islam in the 13th century. This fact is a fundamental source of pride among the Acehnese. They feel that they are the most religiously observant group in the nation. Tradition closely intermingles with religion in Aceh (Melalatoa, 2005). The Baiturrahman Mosque, the largest and most sacred mosque in the capital city of Banda Aceh, believed to have been founded by one of the first Sultans of Aceh in 1291, symbolizes the aura and spirit of Islam in the region. Inside the Mosque, one may feel like being inside the Masjidil Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. This is why the Aceh region in general, and the provincial capital city of Banda Aceh in particular, are commonly called *Serambi Mekah*, which means the

Veranda of Mecca (Masjid, 2005).

Perhaps it is their history as a powerful Islamic sultanate since at least the 13th century that accounts for the strong Acehese tradition of *Perang Sabilillah*, “making war in God’s way to send away *kaphe*” (the pagans). The Acehese had a long history of fighting against the European conquerors—the Portuguese, the British, the Dutch—before Indonesian independence was proclaimed on August 17, 1945. To this day, all Acehese children are socialized in this tradition. Observing this Acehese cultural characteristic at the turn of the 19th century, the Dutch anthropologist and army consultant Snouck Hurgronje concluded that prolonged pressure from external forces would only harden the hearts and minds of the Acehese to resist. As he predicted, during the revolutionary times of the late 1940’s the Acehese contributed considerably to the newly proclaimed Indonesian government, for example providing it with a presidential airliner (Amir Sodikin, 2005, July 23). However, a split with the central government emerged soon after independence, and this breach eventually grew into a prolonged armed conflict that continues today.

The roots of the conflict, as it has been developing for more than 30 years, are threefold, including political isolation, economic exploitation, and a struggle for an ethnic and religious identity (Dedi Muhtadi, 2005a). After independence the Acehese aspired to be given the status of a separate province, but the Indonesian government made it a part of the North Sumatra province, along with East Sumatra and Tapanuli. Indonesia included ten provinces at that time. The Acehese were very disappointed politically, and the struggle with the (central) Indonesian government began. Despite Aceh having been granted the status of a separate province in 1949, by 1953 the charismatic *ulama* (religious leader) Daud Beureueh led a *Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic Army) rebellion and proclaimed a separate *Negara Islam Indonesia Daerah Aceh* (Islamic Indonesian State of

Aceh Region). The central government tried to accommodate Aceh in 1959 by granting it the status of a special region. While attaining this status might have at least partially satisfied the need for a unique Islamic cultural identity, it did little to fulfil Aceh’s political aspirations, as the special region was under the tight control of the Javanese-dominated central government. Eco-

To the Acehese, the impact of the disaster appears to be inseparable from the misery they have been experiencing for at least the last 30 years of armed conflict.

nomic exploitation continued: although Aceh is rich in natural resources, including oil and natural gas, these resources were under the control of the central government and in the hands of foreign investors. When the gigantic petrochemical industries started operating in Aceh in the 1970’s the Acehese were merely able to look at the dazzling lights of the lucrative industry from afar. Disappointment and dissatisfaction with the central government seem to have abounded in Aceh.

On December 4, 1976, *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM)—the Aceh Liberation Movement—was established. Instead of lessening, the conflict between the Acehese and the Indonesian government entered a new phase of open armed confrontation. GAM’s insurgent activities, then led by Hassan Tiro, escalated in the early 1990s in response to which the Indonesian government turned Aceh into *Daerah Operasi Militer* (DOM), a region of military operation. Tired of living in miserable and unsafe conditions due to the armed conflict, some time in the 1990s certain elements of the Aceh people expressed their hatred of Hassan Tiro, who then fled to exile in Finland from where he leads the insurgency (Agus Susanto, 2005, July 23). The Aceh insurgency is very difficult to resolve due to its roots in the struggle for an ethnic and religious identity. On July 19, 2001, the Indonesian par-

liament ratified a bill that granted Aceh special autonomy. Such a status provides the Acehnese with, among other rights, the freedom to apply the *shariah*, Islamic law. Nonetheless, the armed confrontation between GAM and the Indonesian army has escalated since 2003, resulting in deep and prolonged misery for Aceh's common

(Dedi Muhtadi, 2005a). The tsunami, horrible as it was, proved to be a blessing in disguise to the Acehnese and to the Indonesians in general, for it has pushed both GAM and the Indonesian government to make peace. The blessing materialized in what is called *Nota Kesepahaman*, memorandum of understanding, a kind of peace



Photo: AusAID/Robyn Davies

Australian military searching for survivors

people. It was into this desperate situation that the tsunami suddenly intervened on December 26, 2004, driving those who survived into still greater despair.

To the Acehnese, the impact of the disaster appears to be inseparable from the misery they have been experiencing for at least the last 30 years of armed conflict. During those turbulent years at least 15,000 Aceh people were killed and about 8,000-10,000 buildings, including houses and school buildings, were destroyed (Abun Sanda, 2005; Nur Hidayati, 2005b). Life in those years felt like "being imprisoned in uncertainty"

agreement between GAM and the Indonesian government that was reached through a series of tough negotiations sponsored by the Finnish government in January to July of 2005. The peace agreement was finally signed by the representatives of both parties on August 15, 2005, in Helsinki, Finland. To many people the agreement is merely a step in the transformation of the use of violence into the use of political methods for resolving the conflict, even though the conflict itself may persist for decades to come. To most Acehnese, however, the mere intention of both parties to end the conflict has made them feel

reborn (Dedi Muhtadi, 2005b). Thus, for many of the tsunami survivors, the tragedy has apparently been accepted as a moment for repentance, repentance for worldly material greed and a turn toward a truly religious and peaceful life (Hilang, 2005).

What does the tsunami mean to the whole

into what has been called a “multidimensional crisis” that affects practically all spheres of the life of the nation. Aside from the sinking of the national economy, three classes of phenomena stood out as simultaneously symptoms as well as causes of the crisis. These were the decline of what Francis Fukuyama (1999) calls “social capi-



Photo: AusAID/Gregson Edwards

Suburbs of Banda Aceh

people of Indonesia? How do the Indonesians in general make sense out of this tragedy?

To the Whole Nation: A Curse

Indonesians have experienced a series of political crises and calamities since the fall of President Soeharto in 1998. The Aceh disaster may have been one of the most significant events during this period, but it is probably not the last one. The fall of President Soeharto was triggered by a grave economic crisis in the second half of 1997. In the following years, however, the crisis has grown

tal” in the form of distrust and even open conflict among various groups in the society due to differences in what is popularly known as SARA, an acronym for Suku (ethnicity) Agama (religion), and Ras (race); increasing government corruption, popularly known as KKN, an acronym for Korupsi (corruption), Kolusi (collusion), and Nepotisme (nepotism); and the seemingly incessant natural and man-made catastrophes.

Over the six years of the post-Soeharto era, Indonesians have witnessed the rise and fall of three presidents, Mr. B. J. Habibie (1998-1999), Mr. Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001), and

Mrs. Megawati Soekarnoputri (2001-2004); only Soekarnoputri's fall followed ordinary democratic processes. During the short presidency of Mr. B. J. Habibie a 1999 democratic referendum sponsored by the United Nations allowed East Timor to gain its independence. It was of course a relief and a victory for most East Timorese, but a great loss of face for many Indonesians, especially for the Indonesian army. Meanwhile, communal armed conflicts were taking place in several regions of the country, such as West Kalimantan, Central Sulawesi, and Maluku, as well as the rebellions in Aceh and West Papua. In the midst of this chaos, two popular discos

businessmen, bankers, public officers, city and county mayors, as well as members of the provincial people's assembly, have been put on trial for corruption, people are sceptical that corruption will ever be totally abolished.

Compounding the nation's political and economic travails, repeated natural and human-inspired disasters have taken place over this period.

Environmental despoliations: the oil dumps in Sumatra and East Kalimantan, the gold mining dump in North Sulawesi, the tailing dump in West Papua (Alam, 2004)

Earthquakes: Bali, West Papua, West Sumatra, East Nusa Tenggara (Data, 2005), the Mount Soputan eruption of North Sulawesi (Gunung, 2004)

Disease: an outbreak of dropsy caused by malnutrition among children under 5 years of age in several regions, an outbreak of avian influenza in 108 counties and cities in 17 provinces (Dedi Muhtadi, 2005b)

Malnutrition: 8 percent of the nation's children (20.87 million kids) are undernourished due to extreme poverty (Delapan, 2005);

Transportation accidents: a multi-vehicle collision on a freeway in the capital city just before the passage of the presidential motorcade, train collisions in Sumatra and Java, the crash of a private commercial airliner in Solo, Central Java (Lion Air, 2004)

Assassination: of a prominent human rights activist, Munir, in September 2004 (Munir, 2004)

Despite all these troubles, Indonesians succeeded in electing new members of the national

In such an apocalyptic situation the emergence of a new leader may signify the arrival of a *Ratu Adil*, a **Just King who would restore peace and prosperity to the nation.**

were bombed by terrorists in Bali on October 12, 2002, resulting in more than 200 deaths. Several similar bombings took place in the following years in the capital city and elsewhere. Like a bird's eye view of a modern city, these major acts of violence appear as skyscrapers soaring over the "ordinary" buildings of small-scale conflicts and acts of communal violence throughout the country.

The uncontrolled corruption of previous decades was one of the major causes of the late-1990s multidimensional crisis, and it continues. It is endemic to all sectors of the society: business, government, public and private institutions, and at various levels of the people's assembly. This epidemic has placed the country 13th in corruption among 146 countries and has led 70 percent of our citizens to believe that no public institution in the country is free from corruption, collusion and nepotism (Peringkat, 2004). Astoundingly, Indonesians often fail to see that many of their behaviours are actually corrupt (Kwik Kian Gie, 2004)! Hence, although many people, including

Yogyakarta Earthquake

Compounding Indonesia's troubles immensely, a few days before this issue went to the printer, a strong earthquake struck Yogyakarta, the home town of the author and location of IACCP's 2002 Congress.

War Ends in Tsunami Aftermath

The Free Aceh Movement disbanded its armed wing on December 27, 2005 in an agreement with the Indonesian government that was arrived at in Finland. The movement will participate in elections in August 2006, ending the long guerilla war. Under the agreement, Aceh has gained limited self-government and majority control over the province's natural resources.

people's assembly in July, 2004 and a new president in September 2004, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono ("SBY"), the first president to be elected directly by the people. The new hope of a new government emerged. However, the tsunami in Aceh and North Sumatra at the end of the same year stood in sharp contrast to these successes. According to a local myth, such a contrast is not accidental. It is a sign of the times that the nation is in an era of *Kalabendhu*, an era of curse and punishment, an apocalyptic situation in which nature mocks us, for we have failed to treat it humanly and make our lives more human. In such a situation, the emergence of a new leader may signify the arrival of a *Ratu Adil*, a Just King who would restore peace and prosperity to the nation, provided that we recognize the signs and make proper reparations within ourselves. Otherwise, greater calamities may come (Sindhunata, 2005). Thus, to some Indonesian intellectuals, the Aceh tragedy should be perceived as a moment of truth that reveals the weaknesses of the nation. Analogous to the September 11, 2001 tragedy for the Americans or the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 for the Japanese, the Aceh tsunami should motivate the Indonesians to make significant and positive changes in their life as a nation. It should initiate positive momentum to build and increase national solidarity and to actualise the Indonesian identity of the Indonesian nation (Suryoprato, 2005). Many others, however, feel that the tsunami and all the other crises and tragedies are still not serious enough

to force the nation to change and grow. Corruption and distrust persist, and everyone seems to prefer to go on his or her own way. Perhaps this is why, seven months after the tsunami, about 829 families of 3334 people still live in emergency tents in three different places in Aceh. They also have not received the living allowances to which they are properly entitled (Bin Saju, 2005a).

The curse seems to have really materialized!

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Master's Degree in Cross-Cultural Psychology

The School of psychology at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, is pleased to announce a new degree, Msc in Cross-cultural Psychology, commencing February, 2006.

The degree is a two-year programme, the first year of coursework, followed by a research thesis in the second year. A Student Exchange agreement with the University of Hawaii permits students to undertake one semester of coursework at the Manoa, campus. The programme is closely aligned with the Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research (www.vuw.ac.nz/cacr) and may offer opportunities for research and/or internships in government departments, such as New Zealand's Office of Ethnic Affairs. We welcome applications from international students, who may undertake thesis research in their home counties.

For further information about the degree see: www.vuw.ac.nz/psyc.

International students should also consult: www.victoria-international.ac.nz