

DARI ZAKAR KE ZIKIR KE ACEH

Cultural Trauma and the Poetry of Binhad Nurrohmat

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This paper will examine the work of an exciting young Jakarta-based poet, Binhad Nurrohmat. It is important to note from the outset that Binhad hails from the regional capital of Lampung, and has spent several years studying in Yogyakarta, the heartland of Java, or rather 'Java', "that fantasy of rigid feudalism and shadow play" (Maier, 2004: 471). However, the dreaded hold of the Javanese "*kampung*" culture appears, on the surface at least, to be mysteriously absent. Binhad's milieu is of urban Jakarta. Like so many young Indonesians of the 'net generation', his day to day modes of communication revolve around the usual accoutrements of an upwardly mobile man in modern-day Jakarta: the mobile phone, SMS messages, email and gmail. His circle of friends and colleagues is eclectic, and Jakarta-based. His interests are diverse: his distinctly religious perspective on urban life is heavily influenced by his years studying in an Islamic boarding school in Yogyakarta, and his primary subject matter, the sexual and personal politics of urban Indonesian men and women, is a reflection of an unusually liberal theology.



In the last year or two Binhad's poetry has been warmly debated, especially since the publication of his first collection of poetry, *Kuda Ranjang*. Indeed, Binhad's profile has registered enough for senior literari to mention his name from time to time in the odd essay or two, and in fact to denounce his name in these essays, surely a good sign. The commentaries primarily seem to revolve around Binhad's lurid poetic pastiche, and if I were to write the back page cover blurb, I would say it is, on the whole, essentially a hybrid combination of spiritual discovery, sexual bravado and languid post-coital rumination. Meanwhile, the negative reviews I speak about are more often than not expressed with a tone of dismay and self-righteous indignation. According to Binhad himself,

Di Indonesia posisi kepenyairan saya semakin terpojok
gara-gara *Kuda Ranjang* di-gosip-kan banyak orang
sebagai puisi liar, vulgar, dan mengancamkan moral
anak bangsa.

There is no doubt that Binhad's poems are sexually explicit in a way some of us might not have seen before in the field of Indonesian poetry, at least not since the heady days of Linus Suryadi's *Pengakuan*



Pariyem. Consider what many regard as Binhad's "icon" poem, 'Berak':

[Read 'Berak' here]

The raw eroticism of *Kuda Ranjang* might well deserve the pejorative tag of 'vulgar'. But to my eye his poems are about much more than mere vulgarity: they open a window into the heart of the ongoing construction of "Indonesianness" or the Indonesian national cultural identity, what it means to be an Indonesian, and what it means to be an Indonesian man in particular, in uncertain times.



My paper will now emphasise another aspect of Binhad, however, that tells us a bit more about Binhad himself, as well as the nature of modern Indonesian literature. In fact, I would like to examine Binhad recent work in light of events earlier in the year, most obviously the tsunami disaster in Aceh.

Cultural Trauma: the Tsunami in Aceh and the Reconstruction of Indonesian National Identity

As we all know, culture has increasingly played centre-stage in the understanding of Indonesian national politics and society. Therefore, I feel it is extremely important to examine the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami disaster in Aceh in terms of the notion of “cultural trauma” and its impact on both the local Acehnese cultural identity as well as the Indonesian national identity. In this respect, my interest in the life and work of Binhad Nurrohmat is part of a long-term project, examining the immediate aftermath of the recent tsunami disaster in Aceh in terms of the notion of “cultural trauma”. The tsunami disaster, killing over 200,000 people in Aceh alone, was immediately recognised by Indonesians as the greatest trauma resulting from a natural disaster in the nation’s history. In the days and weeks following the event, Indonesian politicians, religious figures, writers, journalists and everyday people on the street expressed anguish that Indonesia,



and Aceh in particular, will never be the same again, and that the disaster will never be forgotten.

Now, what exactly do I mean when I speak of "cultural trauma"? On the one hand, the disaster in Aceh was and is traumatic. On the other hand, this discrete historical fact does not necessarily qualify it in itself as a cultural trauma. A cultural trauma is dependent on the social and cultural context of the affected society at the time the historical event or situation occurs (Smelser, 2004a). In this sense, the tsunami in Aceh easily fits Alexander's formal definition of cultural trauma: "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2004a). It also possesses the key ingredients for a cultural trauma described by Sztompka, where trauma is defined as being "sudden, comprehensive, fundamental, and unexpected" (Sztompka, 2000).

It is by constructing cultural traumas that the sufferings of one social group become the sufferings of another (Alexander, 2004a). Likewise, by recognising the existence and source of the Acehnese trauma, and responding to it in an outpouring of concern and generosity, the Indonesian nation as a whole has taken



on board the suffering of the Acehnese as the suffering of their own. In so doing, Indonesian institutions, social groups and societies have begun the important process of “trauma creation”, in the sense that trauma is not something naturally existing, it is created by society. To understand the embeddedness of the trauma in Indonesia’s everyday life, language and culture is the underlying challenge of my project.

To examine the question of cultural trauma in post-tsunami Indonesia, I think we must first understand that successfully bridging the gap between event and representation requires the creation of a compelling “new master narrative” (Alexander, 2004a), labelled by Thompson as a “spiral of signification” (Thompson, 1998). The aim of this narrative is to “reconstitute or reconfigure a collective identity, as in repairing a tear in the social fabric” (Eyerman, 2004), thus evoking the need to “narrate new foundations” (Hale 1998). Based on Alexander’s “new master narrative” model (2004a) - which in an important sense does set out to trace the narration of “new foundations” - I will outline three questions, or critical representations, that are essential in understanding the process of cultural trauma in the post-tsunami context. These will include:

1. The nature of the victim: what actually happened – to the particular group, the Acehnese, and to the wider collectivity of which it is a part, Indonesia?



2. The nature of the pain: what group of persons was affected by this traumatising pain? Were they particular individuals or groups, and did one singular group receive the brunt of the pain? Did particular individuals or one group or another survive whereas others perished?
3. The relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience: to what extent did the members of the audience for trauma representations – the Indonesian public – experience a sense of solidarity with the immediately affected group, the Acehnese?

This representational process, so important in creating a narrative of social suffering by which a collectivity becomes traumatised, will be examined in the tsunami-affected context. Importantly, this process never unfolds in an unmediated way. For instance, in the context of the tsunami disaster in Indonesia, the trauma process has very much unfolded in the Islamic religious arena, and its concern is primarily to link traumatic events to Islamic theology. Meaning work has also taken place in the Indonesian and global mass media (including television, radio, print media and the Internet), as well as in the aesthetic sphere (including art, poetry, fiction and music). This project will seek to examine the “experiencing of trauma” in these institutional arenas, which are of course mediated by various economic and political agendas. My paper will end with a brief discussion of the unique role Binhad Nurrohmat played in this important meaning work.



Before returning to Binhad, however, another important factor to be considered in this project is that Aceh was already a heavily traumatised society, long before the tsunami. The people of Aceh have experienced widespread and systematic human rights abuses at the hands of the Indonesian military for almost three decades (Aspinall, 2002a), giving rise to deep-seated bitterness towards the Indonesian authorities (Robinson, 1998). Many Acehnese have been calling for independence from the Indonesian nation, especially in the years following the demise of the New Order regime (Salim, 2004), and the Acehnese armed independence movement has been fighting the Indonesian army since the 1970s (Robinson, 1998; Aspinall, 2002a). With so many Acehnese rebels and civilians consequently suffering human rights abuses at the hands of the Indonesian military - with many incidents of arbitrary detainments, torture, murder, and rape - there has been a persistent undercurrent of distrust and antipathy towards the Indonesian state and its institutions, and an ongoing thread of social trauma in the region (Robinson, 1998; Aspinall, 2002a; Siapno, 2002).

The depredations of the Indonesian military - combined with resentment at the perceived neglect of Aceh's 'special status' as an autonomous region and an ongoing pattern of economic exploitation by the central government - have been held responsible for the emergence and later growth of Acehnese nationalism and



the secessionist *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* [Free Aceh Movement, GAM] (Aspinall, 2002b). Ironically, this reaction to the activities of the Indonesian state has led to “a contemporary crisis of Indonesian nationalism” (Aspinall, 2002b). In this sense, if we are to properly trace the character of the Indonesian national identity, then we must also understand the parameters, or “imagination”, of local Acehnese cultural identity, particularly in the post-tsunami period.

Now, as I begin my return to a discussion of my favourite poet for the moment, it is important to note that cultural carriers such as Binhad are central in articulating the claims that lead to a cultural trauma. In this sense intellectuals play a significant role (Eyerman, 2004). In the present context, Eyerman’s definition of intellectuals is relevant: “intellectuals mediate between the cultural and political spheres that characterize modern society, representing and giving voice not so much to their own ideas and interests, but rather articulating ideas to and for others [...] In this sense, intellectuals can be film directors, singers of song, as well as college professors” (Eyerman, 2004). Likewise, in order to investigate the cultural carriers that have or are actively reconstituting the post-tsunami Indonesian cultural identity, this project will examine the Indonesian intellectuals involved in providing the articulating discourse. These may include politicians, political activists, religious figures, journalists, writers, essayists, photographers, singers and filmmakers.



Tracing the character of the appropriate carrier groups is but one step in understanding the tsunami-affected trauma process. Mediated by the possible carrier groups outlined above, the trauma process can be likened to a speech act (Habermas 1984, Lara, 1999). Traumas, like speech acts, have three elements: the speaker (the carrier group), the audience (the public) and the situation (the historical, cultural and institutional environment within which the speech act occurs) (Alexander, 2004a). Following a similar model, this project will examine the speaker/carrier group, the Indonesian public's reception of the cultural carrier's social construction of the cultural trauma, and the particular sociopolitical context of the disaster.

On a conceptual level, this project is grounded in one of the key notions advanced by American cultural sociology, that of a strong program employing the concept of "cultural autonomy" (Alexander 1990, Smith 1998). As outlined by Alexander & Smith (2001), there are three defining characteristics that must drive any such approach. These include a commitment to a cultural-sociological theory that recognises cultural autonomy, a commitment to hermeneutically reconstructing social texts in a rich and persuasive way, and a commitment to showing just how culture makes a difference by trying to anchor causality in certain actors and



agencies, specifying in detail just how culture interferes with and directs what really happens. Conceptually, this project aims to utilise these three ingredients.

In terms of a methodological approach, this project will predominantly draw upon Geertz's notion of "thick description" (1973) as a means to discover and reveal the depth of meaning embedded in the language, narratives, symbols and actions that have helped construct Indonesia's post-tsunami cultural trauma. This will allow the examination of the inner meaning of the trauma process emerging in the post-tsunami period. In methodological terms, the deployment of a thick description aims to give voice to the responses, experiences and concerns of as many cultural carriers involved in the social construction of the cultural trauma as possible.

To map the cultural representations of various cultural carriers, a combination of textual analysis and qualitative and quantitative interviews will be carried out in Australia, Indonesia, and Aceh in particular. This in itself is both significant and innovative. With the national and international focus being on the post-tsunami aid operation, very little has been done to trace the process by which the experience of suffering and consequent narrative of social suffering was created. The "cultural carriers" to be examined include, but are by no means limited by, the following agents or intellectuals: politicians, political activists, religious figures, writers, poets, essayists, photographers, singers and film-makers.



Approach and Methodology

This project will need a two stage approach to analysis and writing. First of all, a “thick description” will be constructed of the impact of the tsunami in Aceh and what it means in the context of the reconstruction of Indonesian national identity. This will be buttressed by a theoretical approach based on the theory of cultural trauma, emphasising the project’s conceptual underpinning, “cultural autonomy”. This will ensure that cultural forms appearing in the post-tsunami period can be isolated for the purposes of a thick description. These cultural forms will consist of:

1. Fiction - including tsunami-related poems by Acehnese writers Fikar W. Eda, Azhari, Din Saja, Wina SW1 and L.K. Ara, as well as Indonesian writers such as Binhad Norrohmat and Rendra, and indeed many many others.
2. Essays - including the series of essays on the impact of the tsunami in *Tempo* by writers such as Danarto and Goenawan Mohamad.
3. Sermons - including the public statements by leading Islamic figures such as Abdullah Gymnastiar, Emha Ainun Nadjib, Umar Shihab, and many others.



4. Songs - including the music of groups such as Slank, Kelompok Dewi Sanggar Matahari and traditional Acehnese groups, such as Komunitas Nyawoung.
5. Photographs - including images by the Acehnese photographer, Bedu Saini.
6. Weblogs - including Internet commentaries appearing in (or hyperlinked to) Indonesian chat forums, such as malesbanget.com and kaskus.com
7. Other aesthetic and emotional aspects of relevant social life as yet undocumented, such as theatre, art and film.

Conceptually, the achievement of a “thick description” requires the bracketing out of wider, non-symbolic social relations (Smith & Alexander, 2001). This bracketing out allows the reconstruction of the pure social and cultural “text”, the theoretical and philosophical rationale for which Ricoeur (1971) supplied in his important argument for the necessary linkage between hermeneutics and semiotics. It is only after the internal meaning of the cultural text has been bracketed and reconstructed that the notion of culture as a social text can be beneficial. By defining the social text as an analytically autonomous culture object it becomes possible to discover what ways culture intersects with other social forces in the concrete world, such as politics, economics and religion. It is also the notion of culture as a social *text* that invites the utilisation of the conceptual resources of literary studies (see, for instance, Caruth, 1996).



Importantly, the thick description this project aims to achieve will be constructed through a methodologically plural or “mixed-method” approach, deploying both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative approach will involve in-depth interviews of a selection of the Indonesian cultural speaker/carrier groups. This will identify and evaluate the methods and meanings associated with the construction of the post-tsunami cultural trauma. The sample will include intellectual agents such as politicians, political activists, religious figures, writers, essayists, photographers, singers, film-makers and so on. Initially, interviewees will be recruited individually, and then the “snowballing” method of sampling will be used.

This will be supplemented by a quantitative approach underpinned by a systematic survey of the Indonesian audience/public. The sample for this survey will comprise of 500 respondents, “people on the street”, as it were, chosen at random and living throughout Indonesia. The quantitative aspect of the “mixed-method” approach will primarily gauge three issues:

1. The public reception of the speaker/carrier groups.
2. To what extent the collective Indonesian identity has shared in the sufferings of the Acehnese.



3. To what extent the tsunami disaster has impacted on collective understandings of the Indonesian national identity.

Both steps of the "mixed-method" approach will help illuminate the other key element involved in the disaster: the historical, cultural and institutional environment within which the cultural trauma has taken place.

The Trauma Process: Binhad Nurrohmat and *Maha Duka Aceh*

In this sense, I am now hoping to return full circle, by examining just one "cultural carrier" caught up in the tsunami tragedy, Binhad Nurrohmat. Now, Binhad Nurrohmat's post-tsunami activities can be seen as a "snapshot" of the construction of the cultural trauma process. Having established a reputation for writing about the raw realities of urban Indonesia - in a frank and up-front manner - in early January of this year Binhad found himself playing a key role. He was soon promoted to become the key contact person for a collection of poetry, fiction and essay written in response to the tsunami disaster, a book intended to be published by the end of the month, an incredibly short time-frame, perhaps unprecedented in the history of publishing, anywhere! Hundreds of poems and short stories found themselves on Binhad's desk somewhere in the rabbit warrens of Taman Ismael Marzuki, Cikini. The book was indeed published, and launched, before the month



of January was out. Entitled *Maha Duka Aceh*, the book consists of over 160 poems from artists throughout Indonesia.

The remarkable aspect of Binhad's unheralded role is that several weeks earlier he was literally swamped by the outpourings of so many concerned artists: his email was overflowing with attachments, his fax machine was working overtime, and his mobile was constantly ringing. Not just with phone calls either: Acehnese poets and writers were sending Binhad their work in the only way they could, via SMS can you believe it. With no other means of communication, this was the only method available. Eventually, Binhad's role became too heavy a load to bare for someone so young. Having done all the leg work, he handed over the reins to more senior poets, with harder heads more accustomed to making tough decisions. The main problem with the project, according to Binhad, was not so much receiving and documenting the huge body of work flooding in, but determining the quality of the fiction. Written in haste, much of the material amassing itself on Binhad's desk was written simply as an immediate expression of solidarity. "Menuangkan 'rasa duka' mereka lewat puisi", so the reviews said.

The usual questions of aesthetics or taste were temporarily ignored, and indeed little has been said about the *literary* worth of such collections. Some critics have



complained at the so-called 'indecent haste' in which Indonesia's artists jumped onto the Aceh bandwagon. According to Radhar Panca Dahana, for instance:

Seni biasanya lebih eksploratif ketimbang eksploitasi. Namun, hypermarket Aceh dalam seni di waktu belakangan seperti memperlihatkan kecenderungan terakhir itu. Aceh menjadi medium bagi sebagian yang ingin menjadi seniman, sebagian menjadi modus mempertahankan daulat seninya, sebagian pengekor saja, sebagian prihatin, sebagian melihatnya sebagai alat dapur terbaru yang diajakan pramuniaga ke rumah-rumah (*Kompas*, 13 February, 2005).

The Aceh 'hypermarket' definitely exists, and it would be an understatement to say that poets are not the only ones hopping onto the bandwagon. In terms of the *Maha Duka Aceh* project, eventually there was enough material for two books, and hundreds of pages of work were discarded.

When we consider the impact of Indonesian artists and intellectuals in the process of cultural trauma creation, it is extremely important to consider that *published* collections of poems and might be just the tip of the iceberg. Thus collections such as *Maha Duka Aceh*, *Aceh 8.9 Richter* and *Duka Aceh Duka Kita Bersama* are perhaps only half the story told so far.



Just as we are now witnessing an incredible boom in September 11-related fiction and cinema, I believe that in the years to come the artists of Indonesia will have much more to say about the tsunami, Aceh, and the historical traumas and collective memories of Indonesia as a whole. Therefore, the budding career of a relatively junior poet such as Binhad is thoroughly deserving of our attention, regardless of the aesthetic beauty - or otherwise - of his poetry. Similar things can also be said of other artists that have emerged, phoenix-like, from the destruction of Aceh, such as the Acehnese poets Azhari, Fikar W. Eda, Din Saja, Wina SW1 and L.K. Ara. Just as Steven Spielberg's excellent *War of the Worlds* contains so many imaginative echoes of September 11, it will also be interesting to see whether Indonesia's more senior artists will also rise to the challenge, drawing upon their reserves of experience and knowledge in new and exciting ways.

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