Rising Above the Tsunami

The UNESCO Cultural and Psychotherapeutic Healing Programme for the Surviving Children in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, Indonesia

UNESCO Office, Jakarta
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The Healing Power of Culture

"Rehabilitation efforts should not uproot and displace the cultural roots because the culture provides the soul for the development of Indonesia. Physical development is necessary, but also important and necessary is the spirit, and that we can find in culture."

Mr. Jero Wacik, Hon. Minister for Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia

"The strength of cultural values can be used to solve social as well as political problems."

Dr. Arief Rachman, Executive Chairman, Indonesian National Commission for UNESCO

"The rebuilding and reconstruction of physical interventions provided only the framework for the society as a whole to recover in the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami. Uplifting the heart, soul and spirit of the tsunami-affected people is a vital element of the recovery process and this is possible through the healing power of culture."

Han Qunli, Director a.i. of UNESCO Office, Jakarta
Acehnese Culture in Brief

Characteristics of Acehnese Performing Arts

The life of Acehnese is very much influenced by Islamic teachings and their natural surroundings, particularly water and ocean, establishing a relationship with God and nature, which creates strong and distinguished cultural characteristics. The spirit of these characteristics can be seen from Acehnese traditional art forms of narrative tradition in Seudati, rhythm in Rapa'i (frame drum) and body movements in Saman dance. The traditional songs normally speak of words of wisdom from the Holy Koran, while the movements in traditional dances very much symbolize the marine life.

Seudati, is a traditional Acehnese performance integrating dance, music and narration in the form of pantun or poem, which often implies the teaching of Koran, the inherited wisdom of life and of nature as well as humour.
What's Unique about the Acehnese Performing Arts?

Most of Acehnese Performing Arts share this characteristic: a marching spirit that symbolizes the heroism they possess. In dancing, the spirit is represented by the intricate rhythm and powerful sounds.

Another unique feature of Acehnese dance and music is that the dancers and players use parts of their bodies as rhythm instruments. They use feet, upper body, and hands to produce unique and vigorous sounds and rhythm. This particular quality can improve their physical sensitivity.
Through the soulful voice of the vocal artist, Seudati also contains the narrative element that reflects a situation, feeling or experience of a current context, while the humour often receives laughter, cheers and claps from the audience. The interaction between the storyteller and the audience not only strengthens their cultural identity and solidarity, but also generates a positive and supportive dynamics among each other through their musical dialogue.

As the rhythm of the percussions increases the performance reaches its climax and ends with a great sense of joy and laughter.
Philosophy behind the Programme

The idea of using art forms came from the concept that art is a bridge or vehicle serving back and forth between the ideal and reality. It links man not only to his own dreams, thoughts and deepest feelings, but also to his environment. For a long history, the Acehnese have maintained a strong and unique blend of culture, nature and religion in their everyday life. The Islamic teaching and the beauty of their natural surroundings inspire most of their arts. It was hoped that by maintaining and utilizing their own intangible cultural heritage, the artists and the children would rediscover their capacity in coping with the trauma.
UNESCO cultural and psychotherapeutic healing programme was developed on the basis of Acehnese *intangible cultural heritage* as one of self-reliant supportive systems within the context of coping with the trauma left behind by the tsunami disaster.
The Setting
The tsunami on 26 December 2004, triggered by a 9.1 magnitude earthquake in the Indian Ocean, northwest of Sumatra Island in Indonesia, ravaged most part of the coastline of Aceh. The tsunami claimed over 124,000 lives, tens of thousands missing and leaving over half a million people homeless. With families torn apart, a majority of survivors still living in temporary living shelters, it was clear that the recovery process would be more than just an issue of providing food, water and shelter.
The Programme

UNESCO Jakarta initiated the cultural and psychotherapeutic healing programme for the surviving children in Aceh with the objective to draw on the strength of the rich Acehnese culture, using it to help Aceh's young generation express their grief, cope with the stresses of temporary living shelters/barracks' life, and ensure that a unique culture, under threat from a wave of outside influences, not only lives and breaths, but grows.

The programme trained traditional artists to revitalize and re-apply Acehnese rich intangible cultural heritage as a method for cultural and psychotherapeutic healing for the surviving children of Aceh. The local artists were trained to emphasize the concepts of *rediscovering the roots*, *sensing the arts and understanding the logic of the arts* structured around traditional music and dance clinics that took place at three temporary living shelters/baracks and one village: Bakoy, AURI-Walubi, Rukoh and Gampong Parde.
The trained local artists then guided the children to express their past experiences and collective memories through traditional performing arts that reflect their cultural origin. This helped stimulate the passion and emotional expression to the dynamics within the music and dance activities.

This programme not only helped revive the spirit of the Acehnese, but also strengthened the inheritance of Acehnese intangible culture and community resilience.
Cultural Event for the Transmission of Acehnese Cultural Heritage

A special cultural event was held on 9 May 2006 at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia, where 46 artists and children involved in the UNESCO cultural and psychotherapeutic healing programme were flown in from Aceh for the event. The event, organised in collaboration with the Indonesian National Commission for UNESCO, the Department of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia, the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency (BRR) NAD-Nias, Plan Aceh and Sacred Bridge Foundation, was in support of reviving of Acehnese intangible cultural heritage.

The objectives of the cultural event were to share experiences and lessons learnt during the UNESCO cultural and psychotherapeutic healing programme, conducted in Banda Aceh since April 2005 as well as to raise awareness on the importance of culture in any sustainable development efforts, especially in the context of post-disaster situations.

The uniqueness of the cultural event was that it brought together government, non-government organisations (local as well as international), UN agency, artists and children on one platform celebrating Acehnese performing arts and demonstrating the healing power of culture.
Healing of the Hearts, Mending of the Souls...
Testimonies

Ismail Sarong is a specialist in musical instruments making, such as Rapa'i, the Acehnese frame drum, and Seurune Kalee, the flute. He acquired this aptitude from the very living conditions of his village, which has always been known as a gathering place for artists. That is why the village he was born in is named 'Gampoong Pandee' (the gifted village).

He was born on 10 June 1940 from a family of artists and his father, Sarong, was a master in Rapa'i making and playing. His grandfather, Sulaiman, was a famous Seurune Kalee player. These skills were passed down to Pak Ismail in the early 1960's when he started to play Rapa'i and Geundrang during various traditional arts performances with the local population. Ismail got married with Rosnidar and had 6 children. The water of the tsunami completely wiped out the entire village and his family: He lost his wife and 5 of his 6 children. However, his strong passion to performing arts gradually came back through involvement in the cultural and psychotherapeutic healing programme. With the help of his friends and son, a small sanggar (stage venue for traditional performing arts practice) is now standing. It was built in the midst of the ruins of Gampoong Pandee, next to where his house used to stand. This sanggar is considered as a comfort zone, for it is full with children's laughter and shouting that healing the solitude felt after the tragedy. For his efforts, Ismail Sarong has now acquired a real popularity in his village.

Rusdian, 23 years old, is the only son of Ismail Sarong, one of the Master Artists involved in the programme. When the tsunami hit the coasts of Sumatra on 26 December 2004, he lost his mother as well as his five siblings. He explained how hard it was for him and his friends to convince his father to get involved in the 'Rising Above the Tsunami' programme. "he didn't want to play, we had to push him, he was so traumatized".

He himself was very interested in the programme. "Since my childhood, I have always played (traditional arts), and I can not live without it". He told us how often he was playing with his father before the disaster. "I was so happy to be able to play again, I hope the programme will continue". Rusdian was one of the young instructors coming to Jakarta for the Cultural Event on 9 May 2006. He expressed how happy he was to play there. "I was amazed of the way we were welcomed by the people in Jakarta, I had not expected such a support from them, for us and for our traditions".

Suhendri, 13 years old, is finishing primary school this year. When the tsunami hit his village, he was at home in Gampoong Pandee. The waves stroke his house, destroying everything around. Luckily, he was able to swim out and escape. He lost his mother and all his siblings on that day, except for one older sister.

He said that in the first days, he was afraid and lonely. When the programme started, his father told him to go and play with the others. There, he met some new friends. Suhendri had a little experience of playing Rapa'i before, but he really learnt during the UNESCO Programme. He was also invited to play in Jakarta on 9 May 2006. "I wasn't afraid, we were playing all together, with my friends". Suhendri will enter secondary school in July. His future is still uncertain, but for sure, he will continue beating his Rapa'i.
Intangible Cultural Heritage

"The intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity."

(The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage)