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The Art of Resistance

Trauma, Gender, and Traditional Performance in Acehnese Communities, 1976–2011

**BY KIMBERLY CLAIR**

Aceh, which is located at the northernmost tip of the island of Sumatra, is one of thirty-four provinces that comprise Indonesia. In the sixteenth century, Aceh was known as a center of trade for Indian, Chinese, and Arab merchants and as a center of Islamic learning. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, Aceh gained a reputation for violence and disaster. From 1976 to 2005, rebel fighters known as GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or, the “Free Aceh Movement”) fought for independence from the Indonesian nation-state. This protracted political conflict came to a halt with the arrival of another tragedy; in 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated much of Aceh, leaving 170,000 people dead and 500,000 homeless.

My dissertation focuses on the conflict, the tsunami, and the aftermath of these events as sources of trauma that have affected Acehnese communities in various ways. Rather than highlight the immediate economic and political impact of these tragedies, my research draws attention to the production of “gendered traumas”—the diverse ways in which Acehnese men and women experience trauma and its effects—as well as the efforts Acehnese communities have made towards trauma recovery. In particular, my work interrogates the significance of Acehnese performance traditions—including dance, music, and theater practices—as a resource for trauma survivors.

I understand trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur.” Because trauma is often considered an “unknowable” or “unclaimed” experience that defies linguistic expression, alternative mediums may be necessary for comprehending and communicating trauma. As a lived, physical experience that draws together a community of listeners, the performing arts are particularly receptive for
High school students perform "Tsunami Dance," Aceh, Indonesia
traumatic expression and may offer “a special kind of physical bond with others.” Moreover, “familiar dances,” such as folk or traditional dances, can be “a source of collective memory, tying together generations and giving meaning to the movement.” These theoretical contributions have guided my exploration of trauma and the arts within Acehnese communities.

GENDERED TRAUMAS

Acehnese men and women experienced the conflict, the tsunami, and the aftermath of these events in different ways. During the conflict, Acehnese women were subjected to sexual violence and other forms of harassment that men were less likely to experience. The National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) found that 120 women were raped, 3,000 women had been widowed and 20,000 children had lost their fathers due to the conflict between 1989 and 1998. In addition, women were detained as hostages and tortured by rebel leaders for information. Reports following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami indicate that the natural disaster killed four times as many women as men. Those women who survived were at risk of being sexually harassed or abused within temporary living shelters established for the homeless. In 2006, the Indonesian Ministry of Health estimated that 400,000 Acehnese could be suffering from trauma-related stress disorders and that the majority of sufferers are women.

The aftermath of the conflict and the tsunami engendered a socio-political climate in which women were made to feel unwelcome, unsafe, or disrespected within public spaces. The implementation of syariah (Islamic) law in 2003 led to incidents of harassment and abuse towards Acehnese women who did not wear their headscarf “properly” or who wore pants considered to be too tight by the syariah police. Further, Acehnese women’s demands for greater political participation and for inclusion within the peace negotiations and the tsunami reconstruction process were repeatedly ignored. This conservative post-tsunami environment had a direct impact on Acehnese women’s relationship with the performing arts. As social expectations increasingly emphasized women’s responsibilities to their family and careers, women found fewer recreational activities in which they could take part without condemnation. Women were also discouraged from pursuing Acehnese performance on a professional level. For Yusrizal Ibrahim, society’s view of Acehnese women who pursue performance as a career is “very negative,” as these women may be seen as “inong biduen [female entertainers].” As a result, most Acehnese girls and women who participate in arts activities do so only as a “hobby,” which does not extend beyond their university years.

TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCE AND TRAUMA RECOVERY

Efforts to use traditional performance as a resource for Acehnese conflict and tsunami survivors took three primary forms: performance programs initiated by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), workshops and performances conducted by local NGOs, and performances held by local artists. Although these efforts were largely successful in creating a safe space for creative expression, strengthening feelings of community and solidarity among participants, and revitalizing participants’ relationship with the arts, my research suggests that Acehnese girls and women were not able to fully benefit from these performance-based trauma recovery efforts and are unlikely to view performance as a tool for trauma recovery in the future.

Performance workshops developed by international NGOs, such as UNESCO and the International Red Cross, were limited by the duration of their programs and their exclusive focus on children (ages 5-18). Because these programs were designed to teach performance activities for several months or
to result in a single, final performance, many of the participants were not able to continue their performance activities in the absence of these organizations. For example, UNESCO’s “Rising Above the Tsunami” (RAT) program gave children little opportunity to continue their education in Acehnese music and dance once it ended in June 2006. Further, there were no female Acehnese instructors and only a handful of non-Acehnese women involved in this program. The lack of female role models may have signaled to female participants that performance is the realm of men and that their participation in the RAT program was a one-time opportunity to engage in arts performance.

Local NGOs also incorporated the performing arts into trauma recovery activities. The traveling performance troupe, Tikar Pandan, visited remote areas to perform interactive theater pieces that aimed to entertain and educate villagers. Fozan Santa, a co-founder of Tikar Pandan, commented, “Both the viewers and the conflict victims were actively involved in the performance, letting go of all the troubling issues that had, up to this point, affected their lives.” Another local group, the Traditional Arts and Lectures Organization (Taloe), taught participants specific dances, which were later performed at public events. Although these programs offered a safe environment in which all community members could explore and express feelings of trauma, local NGOs were ultimately limited by their ability to secure long-term funding and to address gendered attitudes towards performance. For Taloe member Mor Murtala, “There is definitely a difference between men and women. Boys usually consider dancing to be women’s work, and it is usually very easy to teach girls to dance. However, for children with trauma it was more difficult [to teach] the girls because their activities are usually in the house and it was difficult for them to forget things, and because usually they are not as free as the guys.” This comment highlights the need for greater attention to gendered traumas within performance-based trauma recovery activities.

In addition to programs established specifically for purposes of trauma recovery for Acehnese conflict or tsunami survivors, creative efforts by individual Acehnese performers also may have facilitated healing and recovery. Marzuki Hasan, Agus Nur Amal, and Rafly are well-known Acehnese performers who have cre-
ated dance, theater, and musical works, respectively, that aim to reconstruct social memory of the conflict and the tsunami. In his one-man hikayat (traditional story-telling) shows performed on the street, in refugee camps, and in front of mosques, Agus Nur Amal facilitated conversations about military occupation, the tsunami, Acehnese elections, and other sensitive topics, defying the kinds of repressive military tactics that Acehnese faced during the separatist conflict. Amal also encouraged villagers to perform their own hikayat stories; however, few women took advantage of this opportunity. Even though some of the best hikayat performances he has seen were performed by women, Amal observed, "Those who perform hikayat...are all men because men have the courage to perform in public...There are a lot of women who can perform hikayat, but they are too shy to perform in public."

Acehnese performance can bring community members together in a safe space, strengthen individuals’ sense of cultural identity, and facilitate the expression of grievances, all of which are important for dealing with trauma. Nevertheless, my research suggests that performance-based trauma recovery efforts largely failed to address the gendered nature of traumatic experience and to combat negative social attitudes towards women’s involvement in performance.
activities. As a result, Acehnese women and girls may have developed a sense of doubt or anxiety about their participation in public performances, preventing them from taking full advantage of what their performance traditions have to offer, either as a form of recreation or a tool for resisting trauma.

REHEARSAL SPACES
Shifting my research to Acehnese communities living in Jakarta, the nation’s capital, revealed other ways in which the performing arts can benefit trauma survivors. Jakarta is home to a vibrant Acehnese arts community, due in part to the degree of creative experimentation with “tradition” that is permitted in the capital city but discouraged within Aceh, and in part to the large number of Acehnese students who have created informal performance groups in an effort to spread awareness about Acehnese culture and combat homesickness. Further, Acehnese and non-Acehnese alike can study Acehnese performance at an advanced level at the Jakarta’s Arts Institute, taking traditional dance and music classes with Marzuki Hasan (known to many as Pak Uki). My observations of Pak Uki’s dance classes and the informal rehearsals of Acehnese dance troupes based in Jakarta suggest that Acehnese girls and women can find in rehearsals an alternative space for trauma recovery.

As spaces that invite dancers to practice rather than perform, rehearsals give individuals the opportunity to experiment with different movement combinations, to make mistakes, to socialize, and to joke around. In contrast, performances require individuals to have attained a certain level of skill and to showcase their skills without error for a discriminating audience. My observations suggest that Acehnese dance rehearsals can create a nonjudgmental, democratic space in which practitioners strengthen social bonds and experiment freely with creative, physical expression. In this way, Acehnese dance rehearsals can alleviate feelings of isolation, distrust, and powerlessness—an important step in the process of resisting trauma.

The freedom to discover new physical movements is particularly significant for Acehnese. Within the conservative political environment of Aceh, there are few opportunities for Acehnese men to bond in physically intimate ways without being labeled “feminine” or “gay.” Acehnese women are also confined in the kinds of physical movements that they can perform. Debra Yatim, an Acehnese woman’s rights activist, poet, and arts enthusiast, believes that syariah law has both diminished Acehnese women’s confidence in their ability to perform and restricted their movement vocabularies. Yatim observed, “If you’re not fixated with syariah, obviously you can explore your body movements. If you go to Aceh, they’re more restrained. For example, sometimes the tempo gets into a crescendo. But [in Aceh] they do not go to that crescendo because it’s unseemly. They do not spread their legs, which means you don’t explore anything.”

In rehearsal spaces, dancers learn to build friendships and trust their peers, to empathize with one another, and to engage in collective decision-making. They also learn how to let down their guard and to laugh at their mistakes—an attitude that sharply contrasts with the nervousness and anxiety many female Acehnese dancers feel before a formal performance. These lessons are particularly useful to Acehnese women living in a society that discourages them from sharing their opinions and exploring new physical movements. In addition, Acehnese dance rehearsals tend to be gender-segregated, thus offering Acehnese girls and women a “safe space” in which to gather together without male scrutiny.

REFLECTIONS ON TRAUMA, GENDER, AND ACEHNESI PERFORMANCE
Acehnese performance can facilitate trauma recovery by offering practitioners a means to
represent or reconstruct cultural identity; to develop close friendships and build support networks; to resist conservative political and religious policies; to express feelings of trauma, pain, and suffering through verbal and non-verbal expression; and to gather together in a “safe space” that facilitates collective decision-making. However, funding, resources, and social attitudes can significantly limit the efficacy of performance as a tool for trauma resistance. Although international and local organizations may have sparked participants’ interest in the traditional arts, their workshops were short-lived and did not provide participants with resources to sustain their arts practice. Individuals who wish to pursue performance activities are further disadvantaged by the fact that there are few opportunities to formally study performance in Aceh.

In addition, efforts to incorporate performance into trauma recovery methods must acknowledge the ways in which experiences of trauma in Aceh are informed by individual histories and identities. The conflict, the tsunami, the implementation of syariah law, and societal attitudes toward Acehnese women’s roles as leaders and decision-makers have produced particular experiences of trauma for Acehnese women that may cause them to feel unsafe, unwelcome, or disrespected within public space. As a result, Acehnese girls and women do not approach performance activities with the same freedom or confidence as Acehnese boys and men.

Finally, the extent to which performers feel anxious about performing in public also must be taken into consideration. The virtual absence of female instructors and performers within NGO-initiated trauma recovery programs may have conveyed to Acehnese girls and women that performance is, or should be, a male-dominated space. Further, prevailing social attitudes that discourage women from pursuing professional dance and theater opportunities may cause Acehnese girls and women to feel uncomfortable in performance activities and prevent them from seeking performance for future healing needs. With greater financial support for formal and, especially, informal arts activities, greater social acceptance of women’s participation in performance practices, and a heightened awareness of gendered experiences of trauma and trauma recovery, Acehnese traditional performance will be most effective as a mechanism for resisting both large-scale, recognizable forms of trauma and less visible, “everyday” traumatic experiences.

NOTES
7. McCulloch, Aceh: Then and Now, 57.