



Rushing in the coffee shop “Solong, Ule Kareng. (Mardiyah Chamim)

Starting from A Coffee Kiosk

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The raging rolling waves swept away not only houses and buildings but also destroyed the virtual walls that had long isolated Aceh. In the blink of an eye, without any preparation or warning, the entire province of Aceh was suddenly laid bare before the eyes of the world. It was a pity that the crumbling of the isolating walls had to be accompanied by the loss of tens of thousands of lives claimed by the killer tsunami.

Along with thousands of journalists and world citizens, I was one of those who gained from the disintegration of Aceh's isolation. Compared to the period 1988-1999, when Aceh was declared a military operation zone, followed by the imposition of a state of civil emergency between 2002 and 2005, journalistic coverage in this "forbidden region" was relatively much easier now. The opening up of the province was also enjoyed by the local people. One night I invited several friends to have coffee at a kiosk at Simpang Surabaya, a centre for street vendors in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital. Under a full moon, Sari, 26, a sweet-looking chemistry engineer student from Syiah Kuala University who wore a Muslim headscarf, admitted she felt lucky. "In the past, how could we dare to hang around late into the night? We would have been interrogated by the military," she remarked as a light, fresh breeze blew.

Coffee kiosks here are more than just places at which to drink coffee. Rek, a popular coffee kiosk site not far from the downtown market, has witnessed countless "encounters" between the Indonesian military (TNI) personnel and members of the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and local figures. They might have traded greetings, exchanged glances, or just inspected each other's condition and mood. "It can be said that coffee kiosks function as peace zones. In the jungle we could fight each other or exchange fire, but in Rek, we make peace," said Hakim, a young man who lives in Banda Aceh. Sometimes, though, a few arrests of GAM members by soldiers took place at the coffee kiosks.

Coffee kiosks are an inseparable part of Aceh culture. They are places at which to build warm friendships. All layers of society enjoy and seemingly depend on the kiosks. People seldom have ground coffee in their homes. Whoever wants to sip a cup of coffee has to go to a kiosk. "This is because coffee has to be prepared properly. The boiling water poured onto the ground coffee must be accurately measured, hence drinking coffee at a kiosk is more fun and tastes better," explained Ibu Ratino, my landlady in Banda Aceh.

No wonder coffee kiosks are always crowded. In the evenings, students do their homework at tables in the kiosks while telling jokes. Men usually drop by a kiosk twice a day to drink coffee as they read the *Serambi Indonesia* daily provided by the kiosk owner. A cup of coffee, which costs Rp2,000, seems to be

a welcomed companion with which to while away the hours while savouring pieces of cake and *pulut*—snacks made from glutinous rice wrapped in banana leaves. “To us, drinking coffee is just like drinking water. It is essential,” said a male guest, flashing nicotine-stained teeth.

A coffee kiosk also functions as a meeting place.

A coffee kiosk also functions as a meeting place. NGO activists, officials, TNI personnel, policemen, foreigners, representatives of donor countries and organisations, journalists, and even GAM members discuss their various problems here. “In the kiosks, every problem can be easily discussed,” remarked Zuhri, the district chief of Pulo Aceh who I met one morning as he was talking with Sudrijanta and Elis, Catholic priests from the Jesuit Refugee Service, about the technicality of the return of Pulo Aceh residents who had taken refuge in Mata I, in Banda Aceh.

It can be said that the coffee kiosks were the birthplaces of the revival of Aceh’s economic activities, which had been crippled by the tsunami. Only two days after the tsunami, when all other business was at a total standstill, two coffee kiosks were already operating in the capital, one in Ulee Kareng, and another in the compound of Pasar Ateuk Pahlawan. During those emergency days, the kiosks served only cups of hot coffee, while delicacies such as *pulut* cakes, fried bananas and *sarikaya* bread were not available.

A cup of sweet-smelling, steaming hot coffee was truly a luxury in times of difficulty in a region that had been devastated by natural disaster. People queued. Activists, volunteers, and journalists rushed to the kiosks to get their coffee. A friend of mine had to pay Rp7,000 for an empty chair that he put his knapsack on. “You have to hire the chair, Pal. If you don’t put your knapsack there, the chair will be used by someone,” said a waiter at the kiosk.

Unlike the coffee kiosk, food stalls and restaurants needed more time before they could reopen in post-tsunami Aceh. As far as I remember, it was not until the third week of January 2005, that a food stall reopened in Neusu, Banda Aceh, with a simple menu of rice, fried egg, chilli sauce, and carrot and cabbage soup. No sooner had it opened than it was crowded with diners. The volunteers who had for two weeks been eating biscuits and instant noodles acted like hungry wolves as soon as they saw the steaming rice. The food was polished off in less than half an hour. “Wait a while, Sis, we’re still cooking the rice,” said the food seller.

Entering the third week of January 2005, the situation in Banda Aceh started to display a semblance of normalcy. One by one, food stalls began to reopen in Ulee Kareng, Simpang Surabaya, Beurawe, Peunayong, Setui, and Darussalam. New food stalls also opened almost every day in every corner. And coffee kiosks mushroomed again in Rek.

Along with the mushrooming of coffee kiosks, Banda Aceh slowly returned to life, diminishing the impression that it was a dead city like the one in Batman comics. Activities gradually returned. Among the few restaurants that became a favourite among volunteers was the Ujong Batee Restaurant, which offered prawns, crabs, and the bitter-sweet papaya flower leaves. There was also Razali's Noodle stall in Peunayong, which offered a special dish of noodles and crab, or rather "crabs with noodles" because the crabs were unusually big. There were also the Aceh Rayeuk Restaurant in Leung Bata, and the Ceuk Dhek Restaurant in Lampineng. Both served *ayam sampah*, literary translated as "garbage chicken", a popular name for crisply-fried chicken dressed with orange leaves. "Who said that we could not make a culinary trip in Banda Aceh?" commented a friend, jokingly.

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The reopening of Rek, restaurants, and food stalls signalled not only that life in Aceh was being restored, but also indicated that strong cultural friction and exchange had been taking place. Exchanges of ideas and opinion were happening in kiosk corners, food stalls as well as in small mosques. Amid this boisterous din of meetings between people of various nationalities, something was taking place: the internationalisation of Aceh.

I realised this when I met Rafly, a well-known poet in Aceh. One morning in January, Rafly stopped by the house where I and my volunteer friends were staying in Jalan Nuri, Simpang Surabaya. The poet liked to go around the kampongs, meet people and boost their spirits. It happened that *Bapak* Ratino, my landlord, was a distant relative of Rafly.

After hugging the landlord and asking how the landlord's family was, Rafly chatted with the volunteers. He said that it was not solely the tsunami that was the problem but rather how to deal with the post-tsunami situation. "This is a critical moment. Whether Aceh will be better or will be totally destroyed depends on how we position ourselves in the coming days, he remarked. "Great changes await us. Aceh's culture is at stake."

Rafly was right. Aceh was facing a myriad of problems: hundreds of thousands of families had been displaced; children had lost their parents as did kampongs their female citizens. Meanwhile, funds amounting to trillions of rupiah from all over the world were ready to be disbursed to Aceh. It was an acid test for the people of Aceh, not only to overcome their suffering but also to learn that an immensely huge amount of money would flow into the province.

The money was set to pour in as 10 big countries had promised to contribute US\$5.3 trillion in aid. The aid, obviously, was not just a donation but came with strings attached. There were bargaining chips, exchanges of ideas and conflicting interests. True, there were some donor nations—mostly Muslim countries—that did not care how the funds were spent as they simply trusted the aid recipient.

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Some donor countries, however, demanded that certain criteria be applied as though under normal circumstance. For example, the transport vehicles, telecommunication and computer equipment had to be of brands produced by the said donor countries. Besides that, all goods for purchase had to have three price choices. All this was difficult because the situation in Aceh was chaotic. Shops were closed, transport and communication links had been crippled. Even if all the terms had been met, there was no guarantee that the funds would readily flow in. Donors had yet to discuss with their head offices in faraway places—Washington or Berlin—as they studied the feasibility of proposals. Getting funds disbursed did, indeed, have a long way to go.

It was under such circumstances that ideas and proposals were exchanged and bargained for between the Acehnese and the newcomers, who comprised volunteers, NGO activists, and officials of the government-appointed Agency for Reconstruction and Rehabilitation (BRR). All this caused changes in the local culture of the Aceh people.

One of the real changes was the emergence of organisations. For the sake of fund disbursement, local residents had to meet with volunteers and organisations of donor countries as well as government agencies, from *keuchik*, or village chiefs to district chiefs. All of a sudden, the residents had to learn the foreign terms used by NGOs, such as “assessment”, “proposal”, “cash for work” and “funding”.

Not all residents could truly understand these foreign terms. The term NGO, for example, was taken as a “brand” of car whose manufacturer had donated to Aceh. This was understandable because nearly all NGO members operating in Aceh were armed with hardy-looking pickup trucks or station wagons marked with letters and symbols of their organisations. “You’re from the NGO of the Oxfam car manufacturer, aren’t you?” queried a resident when I got out of a car used by Oxfam.

In Aceh then, joining an organisation was neither familiar nor encouraged. For decades, the mobility and activity of the Aceh people had been shackled by the central government. It is true that there are many *meunasah* or small mosques where mullahs could recite Koranic verses together with members of the community, but the activity was limited only to religious rituals. Social gatherings to discuss problems of the community were seldom held. “How could we set up an organisation? All it took was

for three people to gather together and they would be suspected of being GAM members. They might have been interrogated by the military,” explained M. Jamil, 30, a youth leader of Lamsenia village in Leupung district.

Now, after the tsunami, the local people could not help but learn how to form an organisation. They had to stand united, hold meetings and decide who would represent the people while dealing with NGOs, donor agencies as well as government officials. Discussing issues in a democratic way, respecting other people’s opinions and cooperating with compatriots were a must, including adapting to filling in all the small details on financial reports as required by donors.

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Donor agencies, particularly from Western countries, compelled recipients to report all their expenses in great detail so as to ensure transparency in spending. Purchases of nylon thread for fishermen’s nets and nails for repairing their boats or zinc sheeting for roofing the *meunasah* (assembly hall) had to be completely reported and have receipts attached. This also applied to the purchase of 40 kinds of vegetables and spices to cook *pli’u’*, a traditional Aceh curry served at thanksgiving ceremonies.

“This is difficult. Farmers, fishermen, and housewives are not used to jotting down expenditures, let alone keeping receipts,” said Teuku Risman, a leader of fisherman in Meulaboh district. Still, the requirement had to be met. Otherwise, the aid programs would completely fail. After thinking hard, Teuku Risman found a solution. “Receipts don’t have to be officially written. Statements of acceptance (or expenditure) can be written down on banana leaves. The important thing is that we have records,” he said.

As a result, we found heaps of banana leaves with blurred records on Teuku Risman’s desk which read as follows: “Received from Mr. John Doe such and such amount of money for buying such and such kilograms of nails and zinc sheeting.”

A good leader will emerge brilliantly in a critical situation. I found such leaders in Aceh. Lucky were the villages that had sincere leaders who worked hard day and night for the good of the Aceh people.

As we are all aware, there was a lot of hindrance in the restoration process of Aceh due to lack of coordination. The government, including BRR, was not dependable. Donor agencies nervously

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distributed aid funds but were reluctant to try to understand the local people's wishes. NGO activists were busy disputing among themselves in Jakarta. Journalists did not have much time to report every phase of the restoration process, while councillors in the House of Representatives were working hard to find ways to illicitly enrich themselves from the "heaven-sent" aid funds.

It was at this low point that local leaders—be they fishermen, mullahs, village chiefs, youngsters, or housewives in the kampongs—played key roles. It was they who stood in the frontline, earnestly talking with donor agencies, NGO activists, and government officials, to find the best solution for the good of the community. It was also true, however, that there were a few local leaders who did not work sincerely but tended to think only of their own good and interests, including those of family members.

Syamsuddin, a villager from Lamsenia, was my favourite as far as local leadership was concerned. The majority of the people in the village had been swept up and killed by the tsunami. The 32-year-old Syamsuddin, a *muge* or fish hawker, emerged as a true leader when he, with the help of a dozen friends whom he commanded, removed the hundreds of corpses spread through hilly areas surrounding the village of Lamsenia.

Together with the volunteers from the Puter Foundation, Syamsuddin was active in looking for provisions for his village which, for two weeks, had been totally isolated from the rest of the world. A month after the tsunami, the villagers of Lamsenia agreed to appoint him as their new chief or *keuchik*. Finishing the emergency phase, he continued to work hard, building networks with those who were committed to rebuilding the village. Lamsenia ended up being one of the villages in Leupung district to have enjoyed the fastest recovery.

Syamsuddin was not alone. In Lampuk, there was a fishermen's leader called Cut Nyak Daud who demonstrated his admirable calmness and courage while leading the local residents to seek refuge from the raging waves. Nyak Daud also played a very important role in eliminating social jealousy among the villagers regarding the allocation of aid. This 71-year-old gentleman became an advisor for every single problem that arose in the Lampuk village recovery process. In Meunasah Keudeu, Krueng Raya, there was another fishermen's leader called Zakaria Achmad, and in Jambo Mase village, Lamno, there was village chieftain Alibasyah. These two leaders led their villagers to build emergency housing only three days after the tsunami tragedy.

Unfortunately, I could not meet all the dozens or perhaps hundreds of local leaders who emerged in post-tsunami Aceh. The examples I have presented here far from represent them all. Still, the brief description, hopefully, could encourage and convince people that the local communities in Aceh have the ability to recover independently, with pride and dignity.

Local cultural changes took place not only in organisational issues, discussions and the financial report system. Young people, especially the women, began to accept ideas previously alien to them. Many a time I met young women who greatly admired the self-reliant female volunteers from outside Aceh. “How come you’re so brave?” they would ask.

Brave?

Well, the concept of bravery in the eyes of the young Acehnese women seems to be quite simple. A

woman—to them—is considered brave when she visits a coffee kiosk alone, or eats at the Ujong Batee Restaurant without friends, or spends a night at a hotel without a chaperon. Being a brave woman also means if the woman attends meetings of fishermen or NGO activists. “There are many men at those places. If we go there alone, they usually stare at us with wide, open eyes,” said Wenny, a third grader of a secondary school in Banda Aceh.



Smiles of children in refugee camp.
(Mardiyah Chamim)

Looking back to the years before the tsunami, some people considered the movements of Aceh women restricted. Ruth Indiah Rahayu, a woman activist who joined the Kalyanamitra organisation, once wrote about her experience (published in the daily *Kompas* on September 18, 2004) of drinking coffee alone in Ulee Kareng. The cup of coffee she ordered never arrived, while those ordered by seven male patrons who had arrived at almost the same time as

her were quickly served. When she asked the waiter about her order, the waiter asked in return: “Are you married?”

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What on earth was the relation between marriage and a cup of coffee? For the Acehnese, coffee kiosks were smoke-filled places for men with thick moustaches. Women came alone only to order cups of coffee to drink at home, never at the kiosks, let alone to spend time there unless they were accompanied by their “keepers”: their husbands, brothers,

or fathers.

Aceh, like most other regions in Indonesia, has a very chauvinistic and patriarchal nature. Young girls are brought up and imbued with the notion that they simply play the supporting and not main role in life. Although the province has given birth to heroines like Malahayati, Cut Nyak Dien, and Cut Meutia, it nevertheless remains a male-dominant society.

After the tsunami, chauvinism remains prevalent in Aceh, as evidenced in the construction of refugee camps. Women’s interest and opinion go unheeded. Public bathhouses have been built out of short planks of wood and zinc sheeting, exposing the knees and heads of those bathing, obviously making women uncomfortable.

Despite being a predominantly male-orientated province, the waves of outsiders have brought winds of change to Aceh. Many friends, journalists and activists that I met could now sit alone at kiosks, enjoying their cups of coffee and *pulut* snacks without feeling awkward. I felt the same way. Often I found that the thick-moustached kiosk owners glared at me, but I did not bother them. Why should I, as long as I did not hurt anyone? This attitude of mine perplexed young Acehnese women.

“I am dying to act like you, do what I want to do without having to be accompanied by friends or relatives,” remarked Dewi, a student at Syiah Kuala University.

One cannot avoid the change that continues to happen, whether one likes it or not. For post-tsunami Aceh, Internet connections have accelerated the process of change.

One night I was chatting with volunteers from the Air Putih Team at a coffee kiosk in Simpang Surabaya while a group of young people were working hard to set up Internet connections in the province. Anjar and Abidin of the Air Putih Team, and Eric Grigorian, a freelance photographer from the United States, took part in the chat.

Setting up a wireless connection was costly. Tens of thousands of dollars would be needed to buy equipment.

“One by one, wireless connection points (for the Internet), hot spots, have been set up. Our target is at least 50 connection points in this city,” Anjar said.

“Later we can gain free Internet access while sipping our steaming coffee,” Abidin added.

“Fan..tas..tic! We beat Jakarta, where you have to pay Rp25,000 to enjoy Wi-Fi facilities at Starbucks,” I commented, enthusiastically.

“It’s amazing indeed. But, for what? Who will benefit? Do the Aceh people really need hot spots?” queried Grigorian.

His questions damped our soaring spirits. Setting up a wireless connection was costly. Tens of thousands of dollars would be needed to buy equipment, despite the fact that IBM and Intel had agreed to donate millions of dollars worth of computer equipment. But where would the money to cover the high maintenance costs come from?

Besides, were those facilities urgently needed? Wasn’t rice and medicine far more important? Were the Acehnese, most of whom had only a limited education, really in need of the sophisticated system of Internet connections? Why should there be 50 connection points? Most users of the connections comprised journalists and volunteer workers. Well, how many of them? Apart from that, weren’t the Internet cafes already operating in Banda Aceh sufficient enough to accommodate users?

There was more to the Internet connections than met the eye. “Ideally, Internet connections could function as a gateway to the Aceh people, especially youngsters, to think broadly and accept differences of opinion,” explained Abidin.

Well, that’s it! Internet connections would enable the exchange of a myriad of ideas and viewpoints. Such a condition—all the more so with outsiders, Indonesians or foreigners, travelling back and forth to Aceh—would enable the Acehnese to interact with other cultures and witness how other people live. It was a phase, in which, quoting the words of the noted late Indonesian poet Amir Hamzah, one could freely experience other cultures

without

being influenced. Hopefully, the initial phase could further open the minds of the Aceh people to accept and appreciate differences of opinions and cultural diversity, just like a parachute that functions well when it opens out in the air.

It is more than likely that youngsters will initially use the Internet only for chatting. It is also understandable if pornographic websites become popular among schoolchildren. But let nature take its course. With proper training and the right approach, youngsters will realise that using the Internet is far more important than just surfing pornographic websites.

Amidst their busy activities, Air Putih volunteers trained Acehnese youngsters, including NGO workers, how to operate the Internet connections. Thus, writing and sending electronic mail, keeping a blog, making websites as well as doing research via the Internet became their daily fare. “The youngsters come to our untidy office in Setui and practice from evening until night and, sometimes, even until daybreak. They seem to be very enthusiastic,” commented Anjar.

These youngsters bear the responsibility of deciding the future of Aceh. They study and absorb numerous sciences and pieces of information, and have the opportunity to reach the wide world and to make Aceh colourful with diverse ideas. How beautiful it will be then.

There were other reasons underlying Air Putih’s motivation. “We want to introduce transparency in everything here,” explained Edwardo Rusfid, the chairman of the Air Putih Foundation. For the NGOs, the Internet is a very important means of communication for announcing financial reports and making reports for the general public. “Aid funds for Aceh have come from elderly women in France, pensioners in Germany, and factory workers in the United States. We must spend the money responsibly,” he added.

Air Putih has started demonstrating its own transparency. By visiting its website (www.airputih.or.id), one can see that the foundation reported every single cent spent from the funds it received, from purchasing equipment to buying cigarettes for volunteers. “It would just be a lie if we ourselves weren’t transparent. Transparency must begin with us,” Edwardo said.

Committed to spreading a system of transparency widely, the foundation installed Internet networks in offices. Numerous NGOs, from small to big, UN agencies, the TNI, and BRR as well as government institutions have used the services provided by Air Putih. Free of charge. Hopefully, the cooperation will not end up only in setting up Internet connections, but will continue to encourage the type of transparency adopted by the Air Putih Foundation.