

# Reclaiming cultural heritage after disasters in Indonesia

Cut Dewi

While concerns in post-disaster heritage preservation are focused on the loss of known heritage assets, the erasure of destroyed heritage and the exclusion of emerging heritage by the hands of careless expertise is the biggest challenge in preservation that follows devastation caused by a natural disaster. Post-disaster reconstruction helps us understand not only what heritage is, but also the place of heritage and preservation traditions in post-disaster contexts. In my field research in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, I have observed destruction and loss of heritage value as a direct result of expert judgement, a process that suggests the deployment of a very narrow understanding of cultural heritage that results in systematic exclusions of local heritage forms.



The Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Photo by author.

“The heritage sites affected by the tsunami [...] have become places of remembering [and are] a reminder to future generations about the risks and likelihoods of recurring tsunami events”

As it has been argued by critical heritage advocates, an Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD)<sup>1</sup> has been in operation since the European Enlightenment. In particular, this discourse posits that cultural heritage is an object primarily understood to be at risk of destruction and loss. This AHD discourse and definition for cultural heritage is, in turn, shaped by the forms of authority and expertise that have been influential to the heritage industry—in particular, architects, archaeologists, historians, and art historians. These disciplinary experts have been powerful actors who put forward through their work an idea of what heritage is for ordinary people and communities, and who have taken a privileged position as stewards to look after heritage and pass it on to future generations. The dominance of these forms of disciplinary expertise, however, has obscured the social, cultural and political contexts and uses that heritage may relate to.

For example, in Indonesia, the AHD view of expertise is reflected in the legacy of a Dutch heritage policy, *Monumenten Ordinantie* (1931), introduced during the Dutch colonial era, from the late sixteenth century to

1945. Despite the end of the colonial rule in 1945, this policy was uncritically adopted as heritage policy across an independent Indonesia, with updates in 1995 and 2010, setting forth heritage principles that are still in use today. This appropriation, and the associated adoption and dissemination of a universalizing and European discourse, have since dictated standards for care of heritage resources in this Southeast Asian nation. As a result, it has reinforced a tendency to overlook Indonesia’s heritage tradition in the construction of its heritage policies.

## Understanding value

The narrow definition of architectural heritage as an object that is old, monumental, and historical (as articulated in the AHD), has invariably excluded many places and objects which have been preserved in such a way to reflect a continuity of cultural activities in the aftermath of a natural disaster. These buildings and places play important roles in supporting social reconstruction through an articulation of traditions as part of continuous processes of identity formation.<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars have argued that this social reconstruction is needed alongside the physical reconstruction that is the focus of post-disaster work. For example, in Banda Aceh, it has been argued that the social reconstruction of society does not stop after formal reconstruction projects come to an end (such as the five-year plan undertaken by the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Board for Aceh and Nias (BRR)).<sup>3</sup> Still today, the survivors reconstruct their social and cultural life through various means, which includes the construction of cultural heritage places.<sup>4</sup>

The main reason for the erasure of heritage in this particular context is primarily the way that authenticity is understood by heritage experts: the perceived and actual age of a place or building is often mobilized to exclude emergent forms of heritage after the disaster. In Indonesia, the age-limits of heritage value are determined to be up to 50 years old, posing a challenge to the way that heritage debates and management decisions are conducted in light of the tsunami reconstruction. The aftermath of the tsunami in Banda Aceh saw the reorganization of heritage lists on account of different

understandings of value. On the one hand, debates emerged about the inclusion of tsunami sites as official forms of heritage. On the other hand, heritage buildings destroyed or affected by the tsunami were removed from inventory lists that designate heritage resources, resulting in the loss of government funding and support for their maintenance.

For example, the *Badan Pelestarian Cagar Budaya* (BPCB, the Conservation Board for Tangible Heritage) withdrew support and funding for the Teungku Dianjong Mosque in Banda Aceh, on account of issues with its authenticity. The mosque has been destroyed and reconstructed several times in the same style featuring a three-tiered roof, but using different materials—from a wooden structure to bricks and concrete. This heritage organization invoked Act #11 of 2010 regarding Cultural Properties, which mandates a strict code of authenticity in relation to the preservation of original materials in heritage buildings. What has been clear in post-tsunami heritage debates amongst heritage organizations in Indonesia is that the authenticity of the material and style of a heritage remains the main parameter for acknowledging heritage value from the perspective of experts.

My PhD research from 2011 to 2015 revealed that, for the community, this particular mosque still holds the same authentic significance as a mosque even though the physical fabric has changed.<sup>5</sup> Its use-value is also intact, used spiritually for prayers especially during the wet season, and also socially as a place of remembering the past, especially the past related to Teungku Dianjong (the figure who founded

the mosque), the 2004 tsunami and members of the community who disappeared during this catastrophe. The haul, the ceremony remembering the death of Teungku Dianjong, still takes place in this mosque in a collaboration between the community and his family. Yet the ceremony had to be halted for several years until the mosque was properly re-built in 2008. For the local community, the tsunami sites have as much heritage value as the mosque, and they have therefore expressed a desire to reclaim them and have them acknowledged as such. The rebuilding of places, especially mosques, serves an important role in Islamic society and is a process that, I would argue, is imperative to the construction of survivor identity and cultural resilience. In the face of the disaster, rebuilding a historical mosque is considered heritage-making in its most authentic form.

### Healing and social reconstruction

The heritage sites affected by the tsunami, in this sense, have become places of remembering and commemoration not only in relation to the past tsunami disaster, but also as a reminder to future generations about the risks and likelihoods of recurring tsunami events. In this way, heritage sites can become not only a repository of community values and collective memories, but also provide the opportunity to engage in processes of post-traumatic healing and social reconstruction; rather than the physical aspects which might fade.<sup>6</sup> In consideration of these processes, the revocation of a heritage status for

different types of sites, after destruction, hurts in multiple ways. It is a process that makes us consider the effects of applying dominant heritage definitions (such as AHD) to a disaster-prone area like Banda Aceh, which would effectively lose many of its heritage icons on account of changes to their authenticity. While at the same time, new sites of potential heritage value constructed after the disaster are a long way from being recognized as having heritage value.

In my work, I suggest that a country like Indonesia should advocate for alternative ways of looking at heritage not just on account of resisting AHD understandings of heritage value as alien and foreign to Indonesian heritage traditions, but also in consideration of societies that may be more prone to rapid change—as is the case of communities across Indonesia that are vulnerable to natural disasters. It has been argued that Indonesian heritage traditions pay more attention to non-material aspects of sites and buildings, promoting instead authenticity of meaning, ritual, and spiritual activities. In this sense, the acknowledgement that there is a non-Western movement of heritage management now needs recognition from different experts involved in heritage management in Indonesia, especially architectural conservationists, who have the ability to be involved and advocate for alternative ways of looking at heritage.

**Cut Dewi** Lecturer at the Department of Architecture, Syiah Kuala University; and researcher at PPISB (Centre for Cultural and Social Studies), Banda Aceh, Indonesia [cutdewi@unsyiah.ac.id](mailto:cutdewi@unsyiah.ac.id)

### Notes

- 1 Smith, L. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge.
- 2 Daly, P. & Rahmayati, Y. 2012. 'Cultural Heritage and Community Recovery in Post-Tsunami Aceh', in P. Daly, R.M. Feener & A. Reid (eds) *From the Ground Up: Perspective on Post-Tsunami and Post-Conflict Aceh*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- 3 Samuels, A. 2010. 'Remaking Neighbourhoods in Banda Aceh: Post-tsunami Reconstruction of Everyday Life', in M. Clarke, I. Fanany & S. Kenny (eds) *Post-Disaster Reconstruction: Lessons Learned from Aceh*. London: Earthscan, Ltd.
- 4 Rico, T. 2016. *Constructing Destruction: Heritage narratives in the tsunami city*. Routledge.
- 5 Dewi, C. 2015. 'Iconic Architectural Heritage: Its Memory and Conservation in Post-Disaster Context', unpublished PhD Thesis at the Australian National University.
- 6 Dewi, C. 2017. 'Rethinking architectural heritage conservation in post-disaster context', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23(6):587-600.



Peulanggahan (Teungku Dianjong) Mosque, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Photo by Author.