AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE: 
CASE STUDY OF THE TSUNAMI SURVIVORS IN ACEH

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine the Islamic point of view and the role of Islam, particularly the disaster resilience, within the tsunami survivors in Aceh. This qualitative research involved 30 respondents who were the tsunami survivors from Aceh Jaya, Great Aceh and Banda Aceh. The data collection was accomplished by conducting interview and documentation. Those exposed that Islam played a vital role in forming their resilience since the victims believed that, in the view of Islamic perspective, the calamity and natural disaster occurred were the tests for their faith on Islam. This belief, which was based on their devotion to Allah, the Almighty, grew a well-formed resilience among the survivors.

Keywords: Disasters, Islamic Perspective, Resilience, Survivors

ABSTRAK


Kata Kunci: Bencana, Penyintas, Perspektif Islam, Resiliensi
INTRODUCTION

On 26 December 2004, an earthquake and tsunami killed almost three hundred thousand people in Aceh, Indonesia, and nearby countries. The disasters also destroyed all surrounding buildings due to being dragged down by the tsunami wave having height as same as coconut trees. Nowadays, Indonesia has experienced various geological and hydro-meteorological disasters that have caused hundreds of thousands of lives died in the past decade. The disaster survivors, of course, have worrying fates after the disasters, including the loss of their family, relatives and property, getting injuries, becoming disabled, as well as having fear, anxiety, sadness, and anger. Facing such conditions certainly requires the survivors to have the ability to anticipate possible dangers arising and the ability to move on. The last mentioned ability is known as resilience and it turned into a psychological concept that was increasingly being researched since the last few years (Wagnild, 2010).

An individual can be categorized as having resilience if he or she is able to immediately move on to pre-traumatic conditions, even resistant to various traumatic life events. Contrarily, those who do not possess resilience tend to be easily discouraged and stressed, particularly in addressing a problem. It is caused by their small ability to move on and the lack of confidence to embrace a better life. A research conducted by Hamid (2017) revealed that religion was indeed inseparable from human life. In addition, according to Harold G. Koenig (2006) in his book, the Wake of Disaster, Religious Response to Terrorism and Catastrophe, religion plays a vital role in mitigating the impact of disasters and reducing the risks. That the tsunami happened in Aceh and demolished a large number of lives and properties caused various reactions and insights into it.

Disasters obviously cause various reactions by either an individual or societies. Nevertheless, the reactions and understanding of each individual in interpreting disasters is different. Therefore, the discourse discussing the perspectives and beliefs of disaster survivors towards catastrophes should be developed, so an integral point of
view of them upon disasters can be established. Samuels (2012) in his study exposed that Acehnese people in general viewed the tsunami as a starting point for improvement. It occurred and was determined as the power of Allah, the Almighty. As a result, they viewed disasters as the divine message of Allah and as a part of His plans.

Many Muslims in Aceh understand the temporality of Islam. They believe that the death of someone and the doomsday are already predetermined by Allah. For them, the tsunami was a warning, sentence or test sent by Allah that needed an improvement (Samuels, 2016). The fact that Acehnese people are known as the communities who have strong religious attitudes in their daily social life made this research was conducted in the first place in order to describe their spiritual behavior, which brought an impact on their resilience in facing disasters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resilience is regarded by experts as the ability to move on from traumatic situations or events. Siebert (2005) in his book, the Resiliency Advantage, proposed that resilience was the ability to cope with life changes in life at a better level by making the mental health disorders under the stressful conditions move on from adversity. Consequently, it could overcome the misfortune by facing the problems without committing violence. Besides, resilience is a process carried out by an individual in overcoming the negative effects of the existing risks. Then, it successfully deals with traumatic experiences and avoids the negative impacts related to the risk of mental health disorders (Fergus, S. & Zimmerman, 2005).

From the above definitions, it can be perceived that resilience is a capacity, process or result of positive adaptation even in difficult or traumatic situations. It is the result of interactions between an individual and his or her surroundings. Resilience is not only the ability to survive in adversity, but it is the ability to heal and to produce a positive mental health. Several experts have discussed resilience and its characteristics, yet, Wagnild (2009) divided the characteristics of which within an
individual into five basic ones, namely perseverance, equanimity, meaningfulness, self-reliance, and existential aloneness.

According to Wong, et al. (2006), each individual can be directed to use the power upon themselves. One also can challenge his or her soul to go beyond the conditions being experienced to a positive one. As a result, this change enhances an individual to be able to accept his or her existence, physical condition and uncontrolled emotion from traumatic events, which have been experienced. The goal of the adjustment is to help one to choose the right attitude to overcome problems felt. It is also meant to develop the strength to overwhelm the sufferings experienced inside of an individual.

The significance of spirituality and religion in the healing process of trauma was highlighted by Cacioppo (in Meichenbaum, 2005). He coined that sociality, spirituality and the meaning of formation, were the main forms of human existence. He also summarized the relational and collective connectedness in overpowering the feelings of isolation and loneliness. One of the essential connectedness forms for an individual who becomes an adversity victim is the formation of a personal relationship with God or the higher power. As the intellectual and spiritual source of Islam, Quran becomes the foundation and source of inspiration for Muslims, specifically for getting spiritual teachings. The Quran also contains all types of knowledge, which make it the integration of all kinds of science. Nonetheless, the Quran is not a book of science. It offers the principles of science, which are always associated with metaphysical and spiritual knowledge. Many problems have been depicted in the Quran since the early days of Islam. One of them is disaster, which has various meanings. Shihab (2006) analyzed disasters by integrating several concepts of catastrophe, calamity, azab (punishment), iqob (fine), and slander with different definitions and meanings according to the Quran. When natural disasters happen, there are, at least, three categories of interpretations, which are often used as a response to someone to find out the cause of the disasters.

First, the azab of Allah occurs because of many sins committed. It is stated in Quran, Surah Ash-Shuraa [42:30], “Whatever strikes befalls upon you, it is for what your
hands have earned and Allah forgives pardons most (of your mistakes)”. Shihab (2004) enlightened that the problems or negative things sentenced by Allah would impose on people in this world as sanctions for their violations. Next interpretation, disasters are the test from Allah. This is in accordance with His words in Surah Al-Baqarah [2:155], “And We will surely test you with something of fear, hunger, a loss of wealth, lives, and fruits. We also will give good tidings for those who are patient.” The test befallen upon individuals can be the way of Allah to forgive sins, purify the soul and elevate the degree of good Muslims (Shihab, 2006). Third, the disasters are the meritorious deeds of Allah. As described in Surah Ali 'Imran [3:137], “Similar situations (as yours) have passed on before you. Proceed throughout the earth and observe how the end of the non-believers was.” Shihab (2006) interpreted the verse that Allah commanded His creatures, especially humans, to learn Sunnah (the customs or divine of Allah) of Allah since it was the habits of Him in treating a society.

Religion or religiosity both directly or indirectly involved in the health of someone. Faith, religious values and beliefs are central elements of the character within an individual (Rashidpour, 2010, in Jomehri, Mojtabaei & Hadadian, 2014). Religiosity is one of the factors affecting the resilience of post-disaster victims. This was in line with the argument of Bastaman (in Saputri et al. 2011) who claimed that an individual possessing a high level of religiosity (faith) was more able to interpret each event positively. It led the life of one became more meaningful and stayed away from stress or depression. Accordingly, by following Islamic principles, each individual will be able to achieve a good condition within themselves. If a disaster is considered as a mere natural or physical phenomenon, an unready condition to face excesses or the impact of disaster like earthquake or tsunami may occur in the first place.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was categorized as phenomenology research. Examining from the type of data, this research applied a descriptive research method with a qualitative
approach. The population of this research was tsunami survivors from Aceh, who inhabited the most affected areas by the tsunami, namely Aceh Jaya, Great Aceh and Banda Aceh. The 30 respondents were selected by employing purposive sampling technique. To retrieve the data and information that were in accordance with the object of this research, the method of data collection was completed by conducting interviews and documentation.

RESULT

Based on the result of interviews with the respondents who were the survivors of the tsunami that happened in the end of 2004, they interpreted the disaster and how resilience was formed based on Islamic perspective as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The Respondents’ Interpretations towards the Disaster and their Resilience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Islam forming the resilience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Reprimand</td>
<td>● Worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Punishment</td>
<td>● Fortitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Wisdom</td>
<td>● Optimistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Test</td>
<td>● Surrender to Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Forgetting the existence of Allah</td>
<td>● Patient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Tyranny</td>
<td>● Grateful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Affection</td>
<td>● Praying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Trial</td>
<td>● Never give up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● The will of Allah</td>
<td>● Miracles happened by the help of Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● The act of humans</td>
<td>● Lectures of ustaz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Warning</td>
<td>● Getting married again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Immoral deeds</td>
<td>● Getting more blessed prosperities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● The disaster upon the people of Prophet Noah</td>
<td>● Belief in Allah that disasters would not happen again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● The tsunami brought peace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Hakim (2013) divided interpretations of the response of someone upon disasters into six categories, namely the God’s punishment, the God’s test and trial, the God’s warning, the God’s mercy, natural or human disaster, and opportunities. Those
interpretations would have different impacts on one's response to disasters as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2.
The Interpretations towards Disasters Based on the Respondents' Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The God's punishment</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The God's test and trial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The God's warning</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The God's mercy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Natural or human disasters</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Perception on Disasters*

From the data above, it could be examined that each respondent interpreted a disaster with a different perspective. However, they had the same point of mind, having faith in Allah, the Almighty. The disaster was believed as a phenomenon intended by Allah since He had another more wise plan for His servants.

As mentioned earlier, the three categories proposed by Shihab (2006), of which were often used as someone's response to find the causes of disaster, also became the response here. Out of 30, 16 respondents believed the disaster occurred as the test while the rest considered it as the doom. However, no survivors were found who regarded the disaster as the Sunnah of Allah. In fact, this natural causality phenomenon was nothing but it turned into a verse and word of Allah. Unfortunately, many of us were *kufr* (deny) towards His will. Therefore, only *ulama* (Islamic figures) or certain people were able to interpret disasters as the Sunnah of Allah in this case. This proved that there was no clear and detailed information or knowledge conveyed by *ulama* to the communities, mainly related to disaster and based on Islamic perspective.

It is not a new issue that Aceh is a special province in Indonesia, which is permitted to apply Islamic Sharia. Therefore, in their role as a guideline for Muslims, Quran and hadith should be utilized as the guidance in daily activities. However,
associating the issue of disasters with Islamic perspective still seemed taboo to be discussed. Evidently, a religious figure coming from outside of Aceh, who tried to explain the cause of the disaster in Aceh based on the results of his observations, was sued by the Acehnese people. They asked him to apologize since the natural causality phenomenon was not supposed to be analyzed. As a result, many of them tried to interpret by themselves. In fact, a number of verses in the Quran instructed us to analyze the verses. One of which was contained in Surah Shad [38:29], “Quran is a blessed Book, which We have revealed to you. It is full of blessings and those of understanding would be reminded.” The above verse obviously proposed that Allah, the Almighty, asked His creatures, chiefly the human beings, to analyze His verses, so the interpretations could produce conclusions that we could understand. All the verses of the Quran generally encouraged us to ponder, think and dig deeper, so we could take lessons from those. This was in accordance with the words of Allah in Surah Al-Baqarah [2:269], “He gives wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been given wisdom has certainly been given much good. And none will remember except those of understanding.”

From the description of the Quran verses above, it was clear that natural disasters were not entirely natural phenomena. Even in the view of the Quran, it was wrong to perceive disasters as mere natural disasters. The disaster given by Allah is nothing less than a result of what humans have done. In Islamic terminology, it is called *kufr* (denying the teachings of Islam). Humans closed their eyes, ears, and even their hearts to accept the reality of the existence of natural causality that would befall upon them. Either the disaster brought a good or bad impact; they knew and believed it for sure. From various responses discovered, we should think wisely to better understand and study every disaster that occurs around us. The awareness upon the causes of the disaster needs to be built and empowered, so the people will no longer be victims of disasters. Contrarily, they become helpful resources for themselves and their environment in facing disasters (Masyah, 2007).
The Characteristics of Resilience

Each respondent was analyzed by applying five characteristics of resilience detailed by Wagnild (2009), namely perseverance, equanimity, meaningfulness, self-reliance, and existential aloneness. The result of the interview has various implications.

Perseverance is the desire to move on even though an individual experiences difficulties and disappointments. The characteristics of perseverance include the ability to move on, struggle, have self-esteem, and persevere. In this characteristic, it was found that there were striking differences between the disaster respondents' ways to build perseverance. In Banda Aceh for instance, a large number of people living in that city caused most of the tsunami survivors to live. Even one to three months after the tsunami, they felt uncomfortable and had to continue to stay in their relatives' houses before deciding to return to their home, which was completely washed away by the tsunami waves. The survivors also had to feel grateful towards their belongings.

Meanwhile, some of the disaster survivors in Aceh Jaya built their perseverance by walking to Banda Aceh for days. Some even chose to settle in mountains since their houses had become a sea and there were no places that deserved to stay. Few days after the tsunami, the survivors in Aceh Jaya tried to survive by consuming foods obtained from the mountains, such as coconut waters and banana fruits.

Equanimity, on the other hand, is a life perspective and balanced experience. Someone who possesses this will be able to learn from their experience during their lifetime and can take new things in the future. Consequently, they can respond appropriately in facing difficulties. The characteristics of equanimity are optimistic, humorous, cheerful, and able to deal with problems.

It was found that the characteristic of equanimity in general with women when the interview took place upon several female respondents; they found difficulties to tell and could not hold back their tears, specifically when they recalled their children and parents who had gone because of the tsunami. Conversely, this characteristic had been
well established in male respondents. They looked more excited, cheerful and sometimes joked while telling their experiences of the tsunami in 2004.

Furthermore, meaningfulness is a perspective of life having purposes. Therefore, someone who possesses this characteristic should show efforts to achieve the objectives. Life without purpose is the same as living in vanity since it has no clear direction or goal. The characteristics of meaningfulness are religious, purposeful and patient.

Commonly, the respondents interviewed already had clear and relatively similar life goals, namely the life balance in the world and the hereafter, becoming a better person and being patient with whatever they were doing. The respondents revealed that they had tried to achieve those life goals. They also stated that they had tried their best to balance their life between the world and the hereafter, by worshiping more diligently and turning themselves beneficial to others, for example. Those disaster survivors saw the tsunami as the will of Allah, so they could devote themselves to His path again. This was in line with the words of Allah in Surah Ar-Rum [30:41], “Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by reason of what the hands of people have earned, so He may let them taste part of the consequences of what they have done that perhaps they will return to righteousness.” Another verse in Quran, Surah Ash-Shura [42:30], also showed the same interpretation, “And whatever calamity befalls on you, it is caused by the deeds of your own hands and Allah forgives most of your mistakes.”

Moreover, self-reliance is to believe in ourselves with a clear understanding, so each individual can recognize the strengths and weaknesses possessed. The characteristics of self-reliance include confidence and being able to learn from experiences. This could be caused by their lack of understanding upon their strengths and weaknesses.

The well-formed characteristics of self-reliance within the respondents were witnessed when they believed in their abilities. The respondents from Aceh Jaya, for instance, were certain that their life could be better, predominantly when they decided
to seek help in Banda Aceh, even though they had to walk by foot passing through mountains, spending a long time and stepping heavy terrains. The reason why the characteristics of self-reliance were not well developed in some respondents supposedly was caused by the big hope of them to have aids offered by other parties outside of Aceh, so they felt comfortable with such feeling.

In addition, existential aloneness is the awareness of each individual perceiving that an individual is unique. That feeling enhances someone to be able to learn how to live. The characteristics of existential aloneness are self-acceptance and accepting changes. The majority indicated they felt comfortable with themselves and all strengths and weaknesses existed inside them. The respondents tried their best to stay comfy with it although they did not fully understand themselves.

Thus, from the above results, it could be grasped that individuals, who were in a crisis condition, need spiritual beliefs and practices to develop resilience and face the trauma of loss and suffering. Spiritual beliefs were believed to be able to influence the way of people dealing with misery, overcoming suffering, examining problems, and interpreting the troubles. Hadiths related to resilience could also be found from the words of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, “Wondrous is the ways of a believer for there is good in every affair of his. This is not the case with anyone else except in the case of a believer for if he has an occasion to feel delight. He thanks God, thus there is a good for him in it. And if he gets into trouble and shows resignation and endures it patiently, there is a hood for him in it” (Sahih Muslim 2999). For Muslims, returning all problems to Allah, the Almighty, seemed to be more indicative that they really required His help and believed that each obstacle would be gradually changed into ease. Showing gratitude to all gifts provided by Him, both in a large and small amount, would make the hearts of His adherents calm and not be tempted.

Referring to the descriptions above and considering Aceh as a province having a majority of Muslims, the Quran and hadiths should be applied as the guidance in
CONCLUSIONS

The Islamic perspective on disasters had a role in building resilience for tsunami survivors in Aceh. It was evidenced by responses of all respondents, who were the survivors, that tsunami was not a common natural phenomenon. Various opinions proposed by the survivors. Three interpretation categories, which were often turned into someone’s responses to find out the cause of disasters, appeared in this study. The result showed that some respondents thought this was a test and some other respondents considered this as a doom. Community views on disasters include The God’s punishment, The God’s test and trial, The God’s warning, The God’s mercy, Natural or human disasters, Opportunities (Hikmah).

After knowing those meanings, we should review the disaster events that have occurred so far around us in order to think more wisely. Even from the perspective of the Qur’an, it is wrong if disasters are seen as ordinary natural phenomena. As Muslims, we should be more proactive, instead of being reactive, in perceiving the fact of the disasters that happened so far. There should be emphasis given in thinking how to avoid disasters rather than just waiting for disasters to occur. Thus, there are concrete steps that can be taken immediately before a disaster occurs in the future. If we consider that disaster is only a natural or physical phenomenon, we will not be ready to be involved in the condition where we have to face the effects or consequences of disasters. By placing disaster as a social phenomenon, preventive measures can be endeavored so that in the future the community can be a supporting resource for themselves and their environment rather than just being victims or survivors of a disaster.

In addition, Islam pays special attention to the effects of stress on one’s life. Muslims usually make their beliefs as a force to overcome their psychological problems by changing what is in themselves. When they face a condition of helplessness,
psychologically the values of religious teachings can appease the inner shock they feel. When disaster strikes, a survivor tries to resuscitate himself by returning to religious guidance. This is because disaster is a risk that must be faced in living life. Disasters also make us aware that humans are not the absolute owners of everything that belongs to them. This is in accordance with His words, “we shall certainly test you by afflicting you with fear, hunger, loss of properties and lives and fruits. Give glad tidings, then, to those who remain patients; those who when any affliction smites them, they say: “Verily, we belong to Allah, and it is to Him that we are destined to return.” (QS. Al-Baqarah: 155-156)

The verse above explains that resilience is an obligation in Islam. A servant who has resilience in himself can be said to have tested his faith as a Muslim. Therefore, every Muslim who runs the principles of Islam in his life can obtain inner and outer health contained in him.

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