

Memory, Meaning, and Monuments: An Ethnographic Study of Tsunami Memorialization in Aceh

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Abstract. The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004, left an impact on Aceh, Indonesia, prompting the establishment of tsunami memorials to preserve collective memories. This study examines how individuals and communities interact with tsunami memorials in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar. It seeks to understand the dynamic intersection between individual, community, and tsunami memorials using collective memory theory. Findings reveal that memorials serve as spaces of recollection, fostering connections with lost loved ones and reinforcing disaster resilience. However, memory erosion occurs over time due to generational shifts and social dynamic changes. Collective memory theory elucidates memorials' broader societal roles, promoting disaster education and empathy. Beyond commemorations, memorials become cultural symbols shaping memories, meanings, identities, and narratives. This research highlights the importance of nuanced memorialization strategies to sustain engagement, foster disaster risk reduction strategies, and honor collective memory.

1 Introduction

Aceh is situated on the western of Sumatra, Indonesia, and experienced the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami (IOT) that struck and marked a pivotal moment for Aceh [1–3]. The cataclysmic event not only claimed countless lives but also affected the collective consciousness, including the collective memory of communities. The tsunami memorials preserved the tight relationship between the community and the impact left behind [4,5]. In the following 2024, Aceh will commemorate the 20th-anniversary of the 2004 IOT, and a critical question arises: how do these communities interact with these tsunami memorials such as monuments, buildings, the left tsunami buildings, etc.? What role do these memorials play in shaping the collective memory of the tsunami disaster?

As societies pose with the impact of disasters, understanding the dynamic change of community engagement daily with tsunami memorials takes on essential things to be considered and integrated into

the disaster risk reduction strategies. The tsunami memorial sites serve as physical buildings and reflections of the damaged event and act as evolving community narratives that shape their identities, feelings, and healing processes.

This study investigates the interplay between individuals, communities and tsunami memorials, employing ethnographic research methods to understand profound insights into the multi-dynamics of the interaction in society [6–8].

The importance of this study extends beyond the immediate confines of the dynamic of Aceh in dealing with and remembering tsunamis [9,10]. By entering community engagement with disaster memorials, this research contributes to a deep understanding of the complexities of the relationship between societies and the collective memory of the disaster.

2 Methods

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2.1 Research Design

Ethnographic research was chosen and decided as a method to investigate the relationship between individuals, communities, and tsunami memorials. Ethnography eases an in-depth exploration of cultural practices, behaviors, and meanings within their situation and contexts. Given the context of the nature of disaster memory and the complexity of the intersection between individuals, communities, and disaster memorials, it allows this study to capture a holistic understanding of the interaction and research purpose.

2.2 Research Location

The research was conducted in two locations: Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar. These regions were severed and affected by the 2004 IOT, making these places suitable points to see the interaction of individuals, communities, and disaster memories. The choice of these areas allows for investigating urban and rural areas and encompasses diverse individual and community interactions with the disaster memorials. Several locations of tsunami memorials in Banda Aceh, which were the sites of observation and interviews, include the tsunami mass graves in Ulee Lheue, Banda Aceh, and Siron, Aceh Besar. Other locations are the Aceh Tsunami Museum, the ship on top of the house in Lampulo, and the Tsunami Height Monument in Peukan Bada, Aceh Besar.

2.3 Data collection and ethical consideration

The data collection process adopted for this study was grounded in an ethnographic approach, enabling in-depth exploration of community interactions with tsunami memorials in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar. The study acknowledged the significance of establishing rapport and keeping the informants comfortable and employed an oral consent approach. Inherent to ethnography, this approach emphasized building mutual trust with informants and ensuring their willingness to contribute to the research [11].

The primary methods harvested for data collection were observation and in-depth interviews. The observation conducted in order to mix within the communities to see and document individual and community activities, rituals, and emotions connecting to memorials. This method allowed an unseen understanding of how disaster memorials were elaborated into the construction of their daily life. In-depth interviews were conducted with individuals, community members, visitors, and memorial organizers. These interviews, guided by

semi-structured questions, encouraged participants to share their experiences, ideas, feelings, reflections, and insights into their relationship with the tsunami memorials.

The study uses collective memory theory to contextualize and compose these interactions [12]. The convergence of this theory offers a comprehensive understanding through which the intricate interactions with tsunami memorials can be understood, explained, and expanded.

By investigating the in-depth sociocultural connection between individual, community, and tsunami memorials, this study sheds light on the diverse dimensions of disaster memory. The findings of this research hold on the implications for designing effective memorialization strategies for disaster risk reduction strategies, fostering meaningful connections, and preserving the memory of disasters that significantly capture individual and community experiences. Understanding how they remember and probably forget the tsunami memories through pride in their past becomes invaluable in the current situation, where the disaster community resilience study continually evolves and changes [12,13].

The informants in this study included 20 individuals (13 males and 7 females) with ages ranging from 20 to 75 years. The selection of participants was carried out randomly, focusing on those present at the tsunami memorial site. Among the 20 participants, 10 were residents, 5 were visitors, and 5 were personnel who continually worked at the tsunami memorial sites. This study was conducted from May to June 2023

This study considered the oral consent approach to include the cultural context and acknowledged the principles of respect and sensitivity. This approach is inherent to ethnography research practices. This approach ensured that the research remained focused on uncovering the authentic narratives and memories of the individual and communities while minimizing the potential for discomfort during the interview. The data collection looked to develop an intersection and respectful atmosphere, aligning with ethnography's focus on uncovering the complex relationship between individuals, communities, and disaster memorials.

3 Results

3.1 Recollection, remembrances, and forgetting

One prevailing theme from the data was the profound significance of remembering the disaster. In some places, the community's engagement with the

tsunami memorials was deeply rooted in the collective commitment to ensuring that the memories of the event should be preserved for future generations. The memorials became physical markers and spaces for communal reflection and shared narratives. Participants expressed how visiting the memorials helped them reconnect with lost loved ones and reaffirmed their commitment to honoring their memory.

"The tsunami mass graves are very important to me to stay connected with my extended family who passed away. And now, I always take my children, who were born after the tsunami, to visit this place so they can learn about the impact of the tsunami and gain lessons from that event," Male, 46, Banda Aceh.

However, some individuals felt uncomfortable with the presence of the tsunami memorial as it reminded them of the sorrow they were trying to forget.

"That is just a monument that no longer holds any meaning for me and the sorrow I am trying to forget," Male, 58, Aceh Besar.

3.2 Varied Engagements with Tsunami Memorials and the decay of memory

This study reveals that a natural process of memory erosion has been illuminated over time. There were intense interactions with these memorials in the initial years following the disaster. A gradual decline in visitation and engagement was observed. Furthermore, the massive changes brought about by the reconstruction and rebuilding of the areas inundated by the tsunami have made it difficult to recognize the regions affected or inundated by the tsunami.

"I wouldn't have known that this area was hit by a tsunami if I hadn't seen the house with ship on top of it (one of tsunami monument). Around this monument, it looks very different. The buildings have become very crowded, and houses have also been built," Female, 22 years old, Visitor.

This memory fading was attributed to many factors, including generational shifts, competing priorities, and the change in social structure and life mobilization after the disaster. This situation raised questions about how we've still ensured the sustainability of memorialization efforts and the need for evolving strategies to keep memories alive for disaster risk reduction efforts.

The detailed taxonomy of collective memory proposed by David Manier and William Hirst (2008) can provide valuable insights for analyzing this phenomenon [13]. Following their categorization, that the memory existing among the community in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar, especially among the tsunami survivors in the early years after the tsunami, can be classified as collective episodic memory. This kind of memory is characterized by a relatively detailed recollection of an event. Nearly all survivors we interviewed during the fieldwork could vividly remember how the tsunami waves impacted them, how they received initial assistance, how they managed to survive, and other intricate details of their tsunami experiences. However, as time passed, these memories gradually faded.

"I remember in great detail how the tsunami swept away everything in its path. I survived on top of a building and witnessed firsthand the immense power of the tsunami. I am very grateful to have survived, and having this tsunami mass grave helps me preserve the memories. Those memories are very strong, but I see that the generations born after the tsunami don't quite understand or emotionally connect with the event, so they don't seem to care much about the existence of this tsunami mass grave," Male, 50, Banda Aceh.

Additionally, the younger generation, those born after the tsunami or who were very young when the disaster took place, as well as many residents who migrated to Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar after the 2004 tsunami, have no personal memories of the tsunami disaster. The outcome is what Manier and Hirst (2008) termed collective semantic memory among the locals [13]. This memory lacks specific temporal or spatial narratives but still resonates significantly with the present culture.

"At the time of the tsunami, I was five years old and couldn't remember the tsunami events well. However, by visiting some monuments like the Aceh Tsunami Museum and the Tsunami Mass grave, it helps me to recall my memory of the tsunami. I realize the importance of being prepared for a tsunami, knowing what to do if the same situation happens again." Male, 24 years old, Banda Aceh.

Collective memory described the varied ways individuals engaged with the tsunami memorials. Collective memory was apparent in memorials' active role in promoting disaster awareness, educational initiatives, and community cohesion. In this situation, Aceh Tsunami Museum functioned as a fundamental memorial in contributing to the disaster hub for

issuing knowledge and preparedness for tsunami disasters.

Collective memory also highlighted by the engagement of individuals who had no direct experience of the tsunami but were drawn to the memorials to connect with a shared history and empathize with the community's collective concussion.

"I have seen and visited several tsunami memorials, such as the floating ship, the ship on top of the house in Lampulo village, the tsunami mass graves, and the Aceh Tsunami Museum, to get a complete experience of how the tsunami occurred. I did not experience it directly but saw its impact through books, television, and film.", Male, 54, visitor.

3.3 Sociocultural dynamics of interaction

The data highlighted the complexity of the sociocultural relationship between society and tsunami memorials. Beyond being static structures, memorials actively constructed narratives, identities, and local rituals. These sites acted as living repositories of the past, influencing how the disaster was perceived and discussed within the community. The memorials served as platforms for dialogues about collective resilience, fostering a sense of belonging, and promoting cultural continuity.

"We often make the tsunami site one of the places for various social activities such as praying together for the family who died caused by the tsunami, especially during the tsunami commemoration in December." Female, 57, Banda Aceh

The findings show a nuanced understanding of how the individual communities engage with and derive meaning from tsunami memorials. From the deep passionate connections to the natural fading of memory, interaction dynamics are intricate and evolving.

"Tsunami monuments remind us of our family members who died in the 2004 tsunami. Every time we pass this place, the face of them appears." Male, 46, Aceh Besar.

These findings corroborate Nazaruddin's (2023) study on the Aceh Tsunami Museum, which revealed that the museum serves various functions for the locals, including recreational, memorial, educational, and economic roles [14]. Some of these functions may not immediately relate to the collective memory of the tsunami. However, these everyday roles—such as

providing recreational spaces for local youths and contributing to the economic sustenance of particular residents—still significantly influence shaping the collective memory of the tsunami. Even though locals who operate kiosks around the museum might not consciously invoke memories of the tsunami during their daily activities, the museum consistently remains part of the backdrop of their daily lives, thereby implying an implicit and unintentional form of memory.

4 Discussion

The insights drawn from the study align with the tenets of collective memory theory, proving how communities construct shared narratives and identities around the disaster. The tsunami memorials act as focal points for these narratives, supplying spaces for individuals to collectively process their grief, commemorate the loss, and reaffirm their resilience. The study's findings underscore how the physical memorials become vessels for the intangible memories that shape the community's sense of self.

The study's findings probe into the intricate dynamics revealed by exploring community interactions with tsunami memorials. These perspectives decode these interactions, illuminating the varied driving forces and societal consequences that form the basis of these engagements. This approach enriched our understanding of the relationship between communities and tsunami memorials and opened new avenues for exploring how such interactions shape and shape collective memory. It highlighted the role of these memorials as not just physical markers of past events but as dynamic entities that continue to influence community narratives, identities, and resilience in the face of future disasters.

The study's alignment with collective memory theory elucidated how the memorials function as agents for constructing shared narratives and communal identities. These spaces preserve memories and ease the processing of collective grief, commemorating lost lives and reinforcing the community's resilience in the face of adversity. The physical memorials appear as tangible vessels that hold the intangible emotions and histories of the disaster.

Collective memory is also highlighted memorials' more comprehensive roles beyond commemoration. The memorials become lines for disaster education, advocacy, and awareness, embodying the instrumental value of remembrance. Simultaneously, the engagement of individuals who did not directly experience the disaster highlights the ability of

memorials to evoke collective memory, tempting individuals into a shared narrative and encouraging empathy.

The sociocultural significance of the memorials became clear, exceeding their roles as static formats. They vigorously shape narratives, practices, and identities within the community. Through cultural practices and discussions, the memorials contribute to a continuous negotiation of cultural continuity and resilience. The sites evolve into dynamic spaces where communities reflect on their past, reaffirm their harmony, and generate a better future if they face similar situations.

The applicable implications of the study highlight the importance of evolving memorialization plans, processes, and strategies. As the memory of the disaster naturally deteriorates over time, procedures and strategies must be implemented to sustain community engagement, particularly across generational transformations. Including interactive components, academic initiatives, and community events within memorial sites can revitalize ongoing connections.

This discussion encapsulates the study's deep insights into the complicated relationship between society and disaster memorials. By recognizing these slight interactions, societies can boost resilience, hold memory, and praise the enduring nature of those affected by disasters. The study's contribution lies in unraveling the multifaceted layers of engagement with disaster memorials, offering direction for sufficient memorialization, healing, and meaningful relationships across communities.

5 Conclusion

The tsunami memorials evolve beyond physical structures to become integral components of the sociocultural embedded in the community. The findings emphasized that remembering is not static but evolves, influenced by shifting generational perspectives and changing the community in the local contexts. The interconnection of collective memory underscored the various dimensions through which individuals engage with these memorials, displaying their dynamic interrelationship.

These memorials are essential in educating the community, visitors, and everyone about the tsunami's impact, promoting resilience, and easing a sense of accepting what memory is left behind. The memorials serve as lines through which communities negotiate their identities, prove their strength, and reaffirm their shared humanity in adversity.

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