Durian and the Plague

by Azhari Aiyub

Translated by Ninus Andarnuswari

There was no COVID-19 in Aceh. People believed that God had intervened and protected this province that had implemented the Sharia from the deadly plague. In a webinar, a public health expert from an Acehnese university revealed the secret. He said it was apparently because the congregational prayer groups in Aceh closed ranks tightly, while in Java mosques had been closed for a long time.

It was obvious in everyday life in Aceh that there was no Covid. Coffee shops scattered throughout the capital city Banda Aceh were packed with visitors until night. Wet markets were open as usual and shopping centers were busy ahead of Hari Raya—Eid al-Fitr. Nothing could ever stop wedding celebration plans during the pandemic. On the outskirts, residents held weddings by blocking alleyways to set up tents to accommodate 300-1000 visitors. The upper class rented buildings or five-star hotels with three times the visitors. An official spent Rp800 million for his son's wedding celebration, and this was only for the decor. Educational institutions quietly continued with face-to-face learning activities, although these were prohibited nationally. And people could still see parades of innocent teenagers holding torches and going around the city singing *selawat* to celebrate the Prophet's birthday. One wondered, then: where was Covid hiding in Aceh?

Well, what was missing wasn't the virus; it was the data. The only available COVID-19 data was nested on the website of the Aceh Provincial Health Office, and this, too, was very limited. Other than that, there wasn't any information to rely on. The Aceh Health Office as the spearhead of data collection during the pandemic turned into the impenetrable Alamut Castle. Journalists who were still loyal to strict verification, not keen to swallow the government's propaganda in dealing with Covid, said that the Head of the Health Office was the most difficult public official to contact during the pandemic. One researcher complained about the same thing. This official never responded to a formal data request letter the researcher submitted last year for a study. It looked like the Aceh government had learned a new tactic during the pandemic: the more sluggish public officials were, the more the virus would slowly disappear and be defeated.

Surely other provinces in Indonesia deployed a similar tactic, "eliminating data" to make it look as if the government had performed well and the region need not be categorized into a zone with a high risk of COVID-19 transmission. What about death data? The high and unusual number of deaths was supposedly an indicator. However, it was almost impossible to use this indicator in Aceh due to under-reporting and under-recording, further aggravated by another more complicated

challenge, i.e., more than one public cemeteries that dispersed over every village. At the beginning of the pandemic, I ran an experiment to learn about how the Population Service in Aceh collected data on citizens' death, by sending a journalist to the Pidie Population Office. It turned out that it was a passive kind of data recording. Officers only knew that a citizen died when someone reported the death of his or her family member, and this rarely happened except for two purposes: to take over a retirement pension or to remarry. So if people died in Aceh, it might or might not be recorded in the database. There was no need to rush after all; the person was already dead. This was exactly the case with the thousands of conflict victims who were not recorded in the Aceh Government's database.

Every day I dealt with people around me who didn't believe in COVID-19. They came from various social classes and education levels: health workers, lecturers, fishermen, police, lawyers, human rights activists, members of political parties, laborers, artists, religious leaders, housewives, retired civil servants, farmers, drivers, and column writers. I wasn't surprised at all; this also happened in many places, even in developed countries. There was nothing new and I didn't try to change their beliefs. Stories of a group of people taking back a body infected with COVID-19 from the hands of health workers became commonplace—if not prone to be boring, then not interesting at all for a short story idea.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I talked a lot about the outbreak on social media, but now it has been more than a year since I stopped doing it. One of the reasons was because I wasn't an expert. However, I also received a barrage of warnings from people who didn't believe in COVID-19 and were anti-vaccines. The last straw was a motorized *becak* driver in Sabang who had only known me for an hour and tried to convince me not to get vaccinated by showing an evidence from YouTube. I watched the 20-minute piece of evidence to the end: a lecture from a religious preacher on the history of vaccines. The preacher was by no means a vaccinator or a historian, but his entrancing verbal ability would make a sleepy dog perk up its ears. No wonder that my new pal got influenced and tried to save me from disaster. After I watched the video, like a zombie I looked back at him and said "OK" without the slightest effort to disparage the vide speaker's competence. I knew that my wife's friend, an expert in public health, admitted to using similar videos circulating on social media as a justification for not getting vaccinated.

One day I decided to visit experts who had been fighting evil forces in society for decades. I went to the west coast of Aceh in search of plague hunters after watching their videos on YouTube. To reach their location, it took 40 minutes by motorcycle to the north of Meulaboh. The road was decent with beautiful views, groves of durian alternating with mangosteen in bloom. Some of the friends I met up with in Meulaboh, most of whom came out to see me without wearing masks, shuddered when I mentioned the place. They believed that the people there still practiced black magic and tried new poisonous concoctions in the food for strangers. I

convinced them that was not true. In the last ten years I had been there four times, had eaten and drunk at local people's homes, and had come home with a full stomach. The only thing I was worried about was the virus. What made me a little adventurous was that at that time, four days after Eid al-Fitr, I had just had my second dose of vaccine. I'd be right back to the plague hunter as I've suddenly decided that I need to tell you about this damn vaccine.

I was very lucky, actually, to get vaccinated long before the Armed Forces stepped in and the government threatened to mark the doors of the houses of unvaccinated people—reminding me of the Martial Law in Aceh, when the army marked the houses of the guerrillas with a red cross. My experience in getting the jab was quite deplorable, although perhaps quixotic as well. As less-than-obedient citizens, my wife and I came to Zainal Abidin General Hospital to get inoculated. The government had just announced that the vaccines would be given to teachers, artists, and lecturers, together with senior citizens and health workers. Entering the hall, I found it very quiet, although it was 10 o'clock already. There was no queue at all, and some officers yawned—maybe because it was the fasting month. For your information, the number of inoculations in Aceh was the lowest of any region in Indonesia, based on the national tally. We signed up anyway. And the officer turned us down after checking our IDs. He explained that the general public was not allowed yet to get inoculated there. Unless, said the officer, we were on the recommendation list from high-ranking officials or politicians in Aceh. Then he tried to find our names on the list. "No need," I said, "it definitely doesn't have my name on it. And I don't know a bastard who could get my name on your list. Even if I did, I wouldn't use that privilege because I'm the type who respects the queue. I came here on the instruction of the government, and that should be enough." The officer understood my anger but couldn't help me. So I asked him if I could meet with the person in charge. It was no longer about getting vaccinated, since I had lost my spirit, but I needed an explanation. The officer dialed a number and asked us to wait; *Bapak*,[1] he said, was in a meeting. So we waited patiently. Less than 15 minutes later we were called and led to an observation table before being vaccinated. The bapak in question never left his room. Neither was this little miracle interesting enough to write as a short story; to remember it made me sick.

Back to the plague hunters. Don't get me wrong, they weren't shamans nor practitioners of a deviant sect. They were ordinary people who traditionally believed that three things could eradicate a plague: torch, prayer, and march. Not long after the pandemic reached Indonesia, they held a ritual to expel the plague around the village. Reciting prayers and holding torches, they walked through the dark, muddy, and thorny grounds of their village. Allegedly, the strength of their recited prayer could scorch pistils; thus, they stopped praying whenever passing

[1] *Bapak*, literally father, a designation for an older or honored male.

a flowering tree. They did it from the end of *isha*[2] until dawn, believing that after the ritual the plague would disappear from their village. Whatever happened, said one of the elders, they had launched their first attack. They didn't think about the next, though, because it really depended on the mood of the police and *babinsa*[3] who were doggedly trying to break up crowds. In the end, they admitted that the pandemic in the world was getting harder to control, and they were humbled and grateful that God was still protecting their village, and if people were sick or died, it wasn't because of COVID-19. After straining to find them, I was a little disappointed to find the same old story.

So what was interesting to tell from Aceh during the pandemic?

It could be durian.

Since July, durians had been flooding Aceh because it was the time of the great harvest. Usually it lasted a maximum of three months. Durians inundated the streets. With just 20 thousand rupiahs, you could eat a sweet, medium-sized, fatty, pale yellow one while enjoying the view from the side of the road. If you were lucky enough, the durian seller would provide plastic chairs, a table, and tissue paper. Beyond their rough and unpredictable mannerisms, when it came to durian, Acehnese normally turned flexible and docile. No chairs; squatting on the side of the road would be fine. No tissue paper; licking fingers covered in durian fat would be great.

Don't forget to eat it with *pulut*—a sticky rice cake wrapped in banana leaves, grilled on charcoal. Next to a durian seller, there was usually a woman grilling hundreds of them. Sniffing the fragrance of the fruit, usually from my neighbor's house, I thought of all kinds of swear words because I had only had it twice. It was unthinkable: if the plague hunters had recited their prayer underneath a blooming durian tree, surely this king of fruit would've never made it to Banda Aceh.

During the two years of the pandemic, two durian seasons, taking a trip to a durian grove had become a trend. It was clearly because Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Penang, and Singapore, the Acehnese middle class's holiday destinations, had closed their borders. Another alternative for a spending spree is an excursion to Medan, North Sumatra. However, the city, repeatedly declared as red zone, was firmer in implementing restrictions than cities in Aceh, which never had any blockades. As the public health expert said above, there were definitely no mosques open during the pandemic there.

Usually, a tour to a durian grove was backed by rich families. From pictures shared on WhatsApp groups, one could see how they complied to the health protocols: wearing masks after crushing a few durians and washing their hands from a well.

[2] The fifth prayer for the day.

[3] An acronym for Bintara Pembina Desa, the lowest territorial rank of the army.

The owner, usually a nearly retired employee, of course, built a mosque in the middle of his vast durian grove.

Not to be stopped, durian's pungent smell definitely passed through cheap masks. Unlike Covid data, it would persist even when you rinsed your hands in seven steps according to the WHO standard. If you had comorbidities, you'd belong to a COVID-19 risk group, but not when eating durian. The national data that indicated Aceh's high cases of hypertension and diabetes didn't deter Acehnese. They were, indeed, notably famous for their boldness. Formerly lone fighters against white infidels, they now dared all kinds of diseases.

Yesterday I received some sad news. An old friend's child, still in middle school, died of COVID-19. The only child they had. A friend of mine, an artist, also died of Covid. A relative died of Covid. A neighbor died of Covid...

Indeed, Covid was invisible here. The scent of death was not as strong as a durian's. But the sorrow was real. Those who went into the graves might have been saved were we not negligent, and the government were willing to learn.

Durian would return at harvest next year. But those who had made their way to eternity wouldn't. And death turned to regular numbers during these days. I wondered if this was our natural defensive response in the face of a catastrophe too colossal for us to fathom.