

BEBEKAN'S CHRONICLES DOWN-TO-EARTH ACTIONS WITH EARTHQUAKE SURVIVORS

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ABSTRACT

May 27, 2006 at dawn, in fifty-two seconds, three hundred thousand houses collapsed in Yogyakarta, Bantul and Klaten, killing six thousand people. That morning, as a poet and writer living in these region for 20 years, I stopped writing. Amid the ruins, the most beautiful verses look like a parasitic vine that creeps and hinders community outreach. I recycled my writing skills into " financial reports" sent to supportive friends to account of the good use of the money they donated for months to rebuild all aspects of the life of the 500 inhabitants of Bebekan. Inspired by the energy of "*gotong royong*" (community-help) and by a micro economic system based on improvisation on a daily basis to adjust to the wishes of the villagers, a community centre was founded just one year after the disaster. This community centre aimed to promote cooperation between culture and agriculture, education and micro-economics, environment and local wisdom. It was named "Giri Gino Guno" which means "hill of great value and benefit".

I would like here to share the many challenges I've faced throughout this extraordinary human adventure, and the down-to earth guidelines I've learned from the people of Bebekan. Let me therefore quote the 20th "episode" of my accounts sent to supportive friends from all over the world:

May 20, 2008

We left off in October 2007 on a note of suspense about a set of gamelan instruments which a man wanted to offer the community centre, but where to put it? Seven months have since gone by, and the life of the community centre went through many metamorphoses. The gamelan has arrived in Bebekan, but it actually comes from a village not far away, where a group of conservative Muslims rejects any "profane" music. In rural southern Yogyakarta, it is a case as rare as it is saddening but Bebekan is the happy beneficiary. The group of musicians asked that their gamelan be granted "asylum" in the community centre, while allowing the villagers of Bebekan to use it as well. We have therefore built on the northern side of the "*pendopo*" (pavilion), against the wall of the library, an annex to house these very bulky instruments. The group of "refugee musicians" only practice once a month, from nine in the evening to midnight. We serve them tea, coffee and a few local delicacies. As a result, women of the "*emping*" (local chips) cooperative have also organized a gamelan group and practice every Monday afternoon. As for the men of Bebekan, they practice on Tuesday evening. Astonishingly, the young people (girls and boys) who had been so far "allergic" to gamelan and had their own pop-rock band, have asked us if they could also learn to play the gamelan. The

community centre now has four gamelan groups. It is a set of gamelan made of iron. It doesn't sound very "sophisticated" but the musicians (who are mostly farmers) play together with such energy and joy that their happiness is contagious. The gamelan orchestra doesn't necessarily need to be played by virtuosos in order to generate pleasant sounding notes, as is the case for Western symphony orchestras. Each musician plays a note from time to time, he or she strikes a gong, a bowl, a bamboo, and it is the addition of all these blows, which individually might seem fragmented and disconnected, that makes up this lunar and ecstatic music. Indeed, gamelan music is a very good therapy to bring back a sense of harmony into a community whose cohesion has been affected by a natural disaster.

This spontaneous development of gamelan in Bebekan, without any intervention on our part, proves what we have been slow to understand: that the traditional arts can't be "restored" by outsiders, that the desire and the initiative to do so must come from inside, from the villagers themselves. A friend of ours, writer and poet, the Indonesian Jesuit priest Sindhunata, came one day to the community. He told us that for four years he had tried to revive traditional arts (gamelan, *ketoprak* theatre, dance...) in a village on the slopes of the volcano. He had even organized a complete puppet shadow theatre, but at the end of the performance, which lasted all night, he found himself alone when time came to store the puppets in their boxes and fold the screen. According to him, artists suffer from a misguided urban romanticism when they seek to restore the traditional arts in villages, because the villagers feel "backwards" and would much more prefer (especially the young) to enter urban culture. So when urban artists come to them as prophets spreading the word to return to their traditional arts, they consider it almost like an insult, as if outsiders wanted to preserve them in "the mud of their rice fields." Sindhunata told us that we had succeeded in the community centre, because we focused on education, health, micro-economy, modern technology (computer, Internet, video camera) and that we did not touch the traditional arts. We certainly learned the lesson at our expense with the Reog dance group that we supported with the purchase of instruments and costumes, and the training of the dancers and musicians. Now that group is at a standstill, not even bothering to practice, waiting for a performance that doesn't come. But is this a failure? The Reog group has played the role of a genuine post-earthquake collective therapy by bringing to the villagers stuck in the middle of their ruins the trance and joy of this hallucinatory dance.

I must also add that the people of Bebekan, like all the inhabitants of the Bantul region affected by the earthquake, went through a dark tunnel lasting several months, a sort of aftershock, one year later: frustration, jealousy, bitterness, selfishness, as if once their homes had been rebuilt, their egos had reconstituted and hardened like stone. At Bebekan, this resulted in a total indifference to the activities of the community centre. Asep (my associate, member of SAR, Search and Rescue Team Yogyakarta branch) and I organized meetings, but nobody came except the two security guards of the community centre. We had the feeling of imposing this community centre, of managing it against their will. Did it brought in the village a revolution which the villagers did not want? They did not want to be jostled in their habits even if these habits led to stress and poverty. Pak RT 1 (head of one of the village's districts), until then an ally, began to avoid us, even though we had hired his wife as secretary

and librarian (we had her trained for this work). The leader of the Reog dance group, a mask sculptor, Pak Jamhari, also began to snub us. We thought that maybe the community centre had taken the place of these two men who, before the earthquake, were the two village leaders. Perhaps they felt they had been shoved out of the circle of influence of the village as the community centre took more and more space. We almost decided to give up everything. Especially when this indifference took an aggressive turn. One day, one of the guards insulted Asep and threatened to beat him up and "kidnap" him if he did not stop the community centre activities in the evening, after sunset, because teenage girls and boys would meet each other by nightfall there (actually to learn how to use the computer in classes taught by two young girls of the village that we have trained for that purpose) and they flirted, etc. He insisted that teenage girls should not have access to the community centre after sunset. The next day I went to see him. He said his ears were heating up, even burning, because of all the rumours going round. We asked him to indicate who were the villagers who spread such rumours. Of course he was incapable of doing so. We therefore organized a reunion with several prominent villagers.

We asked them :

“Is there in the Quran a verse saying that girls of legal age are not allowed to study in a public place, open and lit up, after dark until nine o'clock in the evening?”

Answer : ”No”.

Question : “Is there in the Indonesian constitution an article that prohibits such girls from studying in the evening ? “

Answer : “No.”

Question : “Did the parents of these girls consent that their daughters could come to the sanggar in the evening to study ?”

Answer : “Yes.”

Question : “So where does it come from, this rumour saying that access to the community centre is prohibited to girls of an acceptable age in the evening ?”

Answer :” It is the *adat*, the customary law.”

Question : “But who has formulated it, what is its legitimacy ?”

No response.

The hidden power of so called “customary law” is sometimes terrifying. It presents itself as ancestral wisdom, but it is often built on hearsay, grudges, jealousies, values presented as immutable because supposedly issued by the ancestors, but nobody knows its origin nor can explain its merits. The incident was closed on this note, but a heavy atmosphere still prevailed.

It was in this dark period that Sheikh Bentounes arrived at the village. Sheikh Bentounes, the spiritual leader of the Sufi Order Alawiyah, based in Mostaganem in Algeria, had already come to Bebekan in October 2006 as part of a visit to Indonesia for the publication of the Indonesian translation of his book "*Sufism, the heart of Islam*", a translation I had supervised. As he wished to salute the people of Bebekan who were very dear to him and see the reconstruction of the village, Asep and I first took him to the terrace of the community centre to drink some coconut milk. Sheikh Bentounes told us that the time had come for us to choose a more effective mode of management for the community centre, that we could not continue solely on the strength of improvisation. He suggested we adopt the method known as "management by

the circle", a universal method practiced for centuries by the Sufis. The Circle of qualities and virtues. It is about finding a balance between the spiritual centre of the circle and the actions and emotions on its circumference. It is foremost a method of working on oneself and then extending it to others. During my visit to Paris in January 2009, at the request of Sheikh Bentounes, one of his disciples, a computer scientist, generously devoted a whole day to teach me the basic principles of this method. But I must confess that I haven't applied it to Bebekan because I don't master it yet.

After the welcome drink, Sheikh Bentounes expressed his wish to visit the mask sculptor, Pak Jamhari, because he wanted to buy one of his masks. We told him that Pak Jamhari had been avoiding us for several months, that things weren't going well for him. Well then, said Sheikh Bentounes, it is precisely the moment to pay him a visit.

We had barely sat down in the house of Pak Jamhari, that his wife served us tea. Sheikh Bentounes asked Pak Jamhari what was the last mask he had carved. Pak Jamhari felt embarrassed, went to get the mask, an unfinished and terrifying face carved in wood. He said that he hadn't been carving masks for several months, in fact since the night that mask came to visit him in a dream : the figure was crying and screaming in pain and it begged Pak Jamhari to stop lashing his face. Sheikh Bentounes asked him what this mask was.

"An evil spirit."

"Ah ! But why do you carve evil spirits?"

"Because in the Reog dance, there are evil spirits attacking good ones, there is good and evil, it is a war between two forces."

"Of course, but in this case, before you start carving such a mask, you must fast and pray. Bring me a glass of water."

Sheikh Bentounes blew his breath over the water and pronounced a prayer or a verse from the Quran, then he asked Pak Jamhari to throw a drop in each of the four corners of his house and then drink the rest. Finally, Sheikh Bentounes bought the mask of Hanoman, the chief of the monkey army in the Ramayana epic. He gave Pak Jamhari 300.000 rupiah (25 euros). "It's too much !", exclaimed Pak Jamhari. Sheikh Bentounes smiled, took one the three 100.000 rupiah bills, wrote Arabic letters on it and said : "This bill, you must not spend, keep it preciously." Since then, Pak Jamhari feels much better, he has framed the bill, nailed the frame to the wall of the main room of his house, and resumed carving.

Meanwhile, the mayor of the region (Bantul), Idam Samawi, had diagnosed the symptom of "mental depression" that had hit all the victims of the earthquake, included the people of Bebekan. He therefore decided to allocate one million rupiah (70 euros) to each village district (there are thousands in the affected region) in order to organize an evening of "reconciliation". It was up to the citizen themselves to decide whether they preferred to organize a party, a show, prayers... Seventy euros seems a paltry sum in Europe, but here in Java, this amount will allow a community meal for 200 people. Three months had gone by before the amount was distributed. Meanwhile things had settled down by themselves, Pak RT1 had become our ally again... He has even been democratically elected "*Dukuh*", that is to say head of six village districts. Throughout the election campaign, we suspended

all activities aimed at adults at the community centre so that it could not be used as a propaganda platform. Rumours already circulated that Pak RT1 was using it as an electoral springboard to enhance his reputation, and even activities opened freely to all children from neighbouring villages became suspect. A neighbouring magician, Pak N., supported a candidate from another district who had promised him a horse-drawn carriage if he won. Some candidates had bribed voters with money. Pak RT 1, who had no money and therefore had given nothing, was elected. After the election, his father fell ill, without strength. The nephew of the mosque preacher suffered sudden atrocious stomach pains. On his death bed, doctors opened his intestines and discovered inside needles and nails. Sometimes at night, dragon-tailed fireballs went through the houses, etc. The people of Bebekan attributed all these phenomena to black magic and they knew perfectly well who was sending this black magic: Pak N., the magician they had so revered until now as their spiritual leader and patron. According to the villagers, Pak N. had not accepted that they had won an election against the candidate he had backed. Filled with a bitter and raging anger, he used his powers for evil and when he reached a point of exhaustion, he allied himself with other magicians in the region who took the relay, an exchange of good services.

One days, as I was arriving at the village around midnight, all the men of Bebekan were gathered in the house of Pak RT1, sitting on mats in front of tea glasses, *dodols* (sweets made of sticky rice) and *mendut* (sweet potatoes cooked in banana leaves). There were also paper sheets with Arabic phrase: prayer for peace and longevity. They told me that there had been a new attack of black magic that night, that their only defence was to assemble and meditate together, and recite the name of Allah (*Dikhr*, remembrance of God), in order to erect a sort of spiritual fortress around the village to prevent the intrusion of black magic. Suddenly, it was as if this black magic was reuniting the people of Bebekan around a circle of spiritual solidarity. Here they were, back together again, united, ready to help each other.

They decided to use the one million rupiah given by the mayor for purposes of reconciliation, and planned an evening of prayers to take place on March 20, the day of celebrations for the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. They wrote "an oath" that was typed out by the young people on the computer and decorated with illuminations. The reconciliation evening took place at the community centre, under the big pavilion (*pendopo*). The *hadrah* group, girls and boys, opened the evening with their drums and their praises to Allah. Then the oath was read aloud, sentence by sentence, and the people of Bebekan repeated each sentence. The event was solemn, moving and heart-warming: *"We swear to always remain united in our activities, our feelings and our work in order to rebuild our village in a prosperous, democratic and religious way... By the oath we have just made, all the problems that have destroyed the fraternity, all the disagreements, the hatred and the bitterness are hereby cleared. The harmony for our common well-being is restored. Together, this evening we are committed to this promise and commit ourselves to achieve it. Bebekan, March 20, 2008*

Are signatories to this pledge: the religious representative, the citizens representative, the youth representative, the women representative, the village head."

The earthquake has triggered in ourselves an inner revolution. It is as if we are still being carried by its shockwave and are acting, despite ourselves, under its influence. It is up to the survivors, which we all are, to transform the destructive aspect of this telluric force into an energy of action and feeling to serve others.

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