

# Lights, Camera, Action!

The making of the Indonesian film, titled *'Peujroh Laot'*, shows how modern media can be used to revive customary practices in fisheries resource management

The *Panglima Laot* ('Commander of the Sea', in the Acehese dialect) has been the customary institution that has regulated and managed the coastal fishery of the Indonesian province of Aceh. However, in the period following the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and with the opening up of Aceh to new democratic influences, several factors have combined to weaken the role of the *Panglima Laot*. Many of the older *Panglima Laot* died during the tsunami. The new incumbents, who were quickly elected to take the place of their departed leaders, were not fully cognizant of their roles and responsibilities or the procedures to be adopted for conflict resolution. The recent strengthening of the State has also led to greater interference and takeover of the role of conflict resolution in the sea, at times by the police and the navy, and at other times, by the Fisheries Department.

It is important that conflicts over resource and space be settled quickly and effectively if co-management of the fishery is to succeed. In the case of Aceh, this would imply that we need to reaffirm the role of the *Panglima Laot* in continuing to do what they did in the pre-tsunami period. How can this be done most effectively? Traditional advocacy and awareness-raising media tools like brochures, posters, talks, and discussions between the *Panglima Laot* and the State authorities are possible. However, given the general influence of the medium of cinema in Aceh, the use of a film to drive home the role and importance of the institution of the *Panglima Laot* would perhaps be more appropriate.

That realization was the driving force behind the idea to make the film titled *'Peujroh Laot'* (meaning 'Sustain the Sea' in Acehese). First mooted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)/UN's American Red Cross-funded project in Aceh, the idea of cinema as the apt medium to document the customary and traditional knowledge of the fishers of Aceh came about as a result of collective brainstorming in the group.

Once the medium of cinema was selected, the choice was between making a customary educational

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documentary and a more 'popular' film with a good storyline, believably arresting characterization and a strong message. From discussions and reviews of existing documentaries, it became apparent that the latter option would be more acceptable to the audiences in Aceh and elsewhere in Indonesia. A conventional documentary approach would have been viewed as mere 'preaching', while a storytelling approach, laced with humour and romance, would have been closer to the lives and hearts of the common folk of entertainment-starved Aceh.

## History and development

A researcher who had been working closely with the *Panglima Laot* on its history and development was

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commissioned to write the script for the film. When they were shown the final script, Eumpang Breuh (Sack of Rice) Foundation, the well-known Acehese comic film group set up by actors from the poorer, rural sections of the community, was so impressed that

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they readily agreed to take up *Peujroh Laot* as the seventh production in their series of very popular and commercially successful films.

The storyline of *Peujroh Laot* takes off from a conflict between two groups in a fishing village over the netting of a shoal of fish. One group sights the shoal and stakes a 'claim' to it by using the customary signal of waving caps. In fact, however, the other group, which is faster in manoeuvring their boat, actually reaches the fishing ground first, encircles the shoal and hauls the fish on board. A conflict erupts around the question: Who has the right to the earnings from the fish catch—the group that caught the fish or the group that first sighted it? Or both?

The film's script seeks to establish that there is an inherent process within the customary rules of the *Panglima Laot* for settling such conflicts. However, the awareness of this mechanism is not widespread. The *Panglima Laot* has special customary court procedures to mete out speedy justice in a manner that does not create animosity or rancour. The film depicts the court procedures involved, and highlights the role and significance of the *Panglima Laot* in the fishery, and the legal and cultural landscape of Aceh.

In the process of the story's unfolding, several messages about responsible fisheries, care for the coastal environment, the good practices that have to be adopted for fish processing, and the importance of co-management, among other issues, are also communicated. The cultural practices of Aceh and the religious significance of protection of marine resources are also showcased.

As a strategy to make the production process more participatory, the producer and the director of the film agreed to call for screen tests, numerous local people who were involved in the *Panglima Laot*, in the fisheries and in the community, including staff from the navy, the police and FAO.

Produced in Acehese, the film draws heavily on the humour and the idiom of the coastal population of the region. Stylistically, the film is the inevitably delectable mishmash of romance, comedy and Bollywood-style songs so greatly appreciated in Aceh. Little wonder then that the film had a huge appeal. Yet, because of the fact that it was set in the context of the larger backdrop of the fishery conflict and its resolution, the film's kitschy style actually served to create greater recall of its message.

### Discouraging piracy

In order to discourage piracy of the film video, a marketing strategy was devised that ensured greater monetary returns and wider distribution of the film—and hence its message. Rights were granted to the Eumpang Breuh Foundation to produce and sell additional copies of the film, provided they made no change to its contents. They could sell each

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A love song sequence from the Indonesian film, *Peujroh Laot*. The film depicts the role and significance of the *Panglima Laot* in the fishery, and the legal and cultural landscape of Aceh

## ***Panglima Laot: A Unique Institution***

Ever since the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004, the popular customary institution in the northern Indonesian province of Aceh known as *Panglima Laot* has gained new recognition by the government, and local, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). *Panglima Laot*, which translates as "sea commanders", is a customary social institution that organizes the nature and modality of fishing in the sea. It is not just a regulatory body, but also a system of leadership for the fishermen community in Aceh.

The origins of *Panglima Laot* can be traced to the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1590-1636), the famous twelfth sultan of the Islamic Kingdom of Aceh. During that era, the main duties of the *Panglima Laot* were to collect tax from those arriving at the harbour and to mobilize the local men, especially fishermen, for warfare.

The history of *Panglima Laot* is replete with interesting incidents. The celebrated traveler from Morocco, Ibn Battuta is said to have had to first meet the *Panglima Laot* before he could meet the reigning sultan. The great Acehnese *ulema* (religious leader), Syaikh Abdul Rauf, needed permission from the *Panglima Laot* to make his home in the river mouth of Syiah Kuala.

Sultan Iskandar Muda is said to have ordered the *Panglima Laot* to provide fish to Marco Polo while he waited in Aceh for six months for favourable winds to take his fleet back to Europe. Incidentally, on that journey Marco Polo was taking along with him the Chinese princess Co-Ca-Chin, from Kublai Khan's Mongolia, to be given in marriage to King Arghun Khan of Persia.

After Indonesia's independence on 17 August 1945, *Panglima Laot's* mandate shifted to organizing fishing in Aceh's coastal areas, and solving the conflicts that took place at sea among fishermen. Each *Panglima Laot* had his own independent base called a *lhok* (bay), which is a socio-ecological unit in which there is usually a *kuala* (river mouth) and a *dermaga* (boat docking centre). In 1982, in Langsa, the capital of East Aceh, a congress for the entire *Panglima Laot* was held. That resulted in the establishment of the District *Panglima Laot* (*Panglima Laot Kabupaten*). This institution used the traditional adat (customary law) court to solve the conflict between two *lhoks* that they could not solve themselves.

In 2000, at another *Panglima Laot* congress, attended by all the *lhok* sea commanders, held on the island of Sabang in Aceh, the provincial *Panglima Laot*, named *Panglima Laot Aceh*, was established. This institution was meant to co-ordinate the *hukum adat laot* (traditional marine law), to liaise between fishermen and the government, and to advocate for a marine and fisheries policy, including legislation, which would advance the prosperity of Aceh's fishing community.

*Panglima Laot Aceh* played an important role in the post-tsunami recovery and reconstruction phase. It co-operated with international donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In 2007, the *Panglima Laot* collaborated with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to run a fisheries co-management programme. In 2008, *Panglima Laot* also became a member of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP).

In 2008, after the Helsinki Declaration, which brought peace to Aceh after three decades of conflict with the central government, *Panglima Laot* gained official legal recognition as one of the legitimate customary institutions in Aceh.

In sum, the *Panglima Laot*:

- regulates fishing and days at sea, as well as revenue sharing;
- settles conflicts and disputes among fishermen;
- co-ordinates and implements the customary law, thus enhancing the region's fisheries resource base; and
- advocates for a marine and fisheries policy that will increase the all-round prosperity of Aceh's fishing community.

As the customary repository of leadership for Aceh's fishing community, as the key liaison between the government and the community, and as a partner in the sustainable development of the region's marine and fisheries sector, the *Panglima Laot* plays a very important and strategic role in the province, and can serve as an example, for traditional fishing communities elsewhere, of community-based natural resource management.

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5,000 copies of the film were distributed free in Aceh. Overall, retail sales have crossed 20,000 copies

of these videos at IDR15,000, which was IDR 5,000 below the retail market price (US\$1 = approx. IDR10,000). This lower retail price was stamped on the video cover to prevent retailers from cheating customers. From the sales revenue generated, the Foundation would give IDR1,000 per video to the Panglima Laot to fund their own awareness campaigns. The remainder was to be used by the Foundation for fostering arts, acting and dramatic skills among the youth in Aceh.


Shot in different locations in Aceh between January and March 2009, *Peujroh Laot* premiered in Banda Aceh on 6 April 2009 in a coastal settlement. Five thousand copies were distributed free along the coastal districts of Aceh through community motivators and the *Panglima Laot*. Sales of the commercial version of the film, which had exactly the same content, and was titled *Panglima Laot*, began at 6 pm on the same day. By 8 April, all 5,000 copies had been sold out.

By the end of April, the video shops in Banda Aceh had no stocks left. Overall, retail sales have crossed 20,000 copies. This is evident from the IDR20 mn that was paid to the *Panglima Laot* as per the agreement. Factoring in the public distribution, the unit cost of the film to the FAO project would probably work out to only around US\$1 per video. There are reports of the film being viewed by the Acehnese diaspora in Malaysia, and it is regularly demanded for viewing on the long-distance buses plying between Banda Aceh and Medan.

### Survey results

An impact assessment survey of about 600 persons along the west and north coasts of Aceh found that about 88 per cent had seen the film. Most men watched the movie in the coffee shops (Aceh has no movie theatres) and most women on their home television sets. On average, each person viewed the film thrice. Some respondents reported seeing it over 15 times. Over 90 per cent of the

respondents have watched the earlier movies of the Eumpang Breuh Foundation, and 55 per cent rate this film as being better than the Foundation's earlier films. As many as 96 per cent recalled the key message of the movie—that conflict in fishery should be first solved by the *adat* (customary law) court. Ninety per cent of the men and 60 per cent of the women in the fishing communities interviewed said that the movie related very closely to the reality of their lives. In the non-fishing communities, this percentage was only about 30 and 25, respectively.

The participatory process of making the film, its commercial success and the fact that its key message was well understood by the viewers provide a good example of how contemporary media can be effectively used to propagate the good aspects of customary institutions in sustainable fisheries management. 

### For more

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panglima\\_La%C3%B4t](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panglima_La%C3%B4t)

#### Panglima Laot: from Wikipedia

<http://hendrasiry.wordpress.com/2009/04/09/film-on-indonesian-customary-marine-law-premiered-by-fao/>  
**Film on Indonesian Customary Marine Law Premiered by FAO**

[http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:uZq9lHrjKlgJ:www.icsf.net/icsf2006/uploads/resources/usefulDocs/docs/english/%253C1178366644302%253Eadli\\_pl.ppt+Panglima+Laot&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk](http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:uZq9lHrjKlgJ:www.icsf.net/icsf2006/uploads/resources/usefulDocs/docs/english/%253C1178366644302%253Eadli_pl.ppt+Panglima+Laot&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk)

#### Who is Panglima Laot?

[www.panglima.net](http://www.panglima.net)  
**Lembaga Hukum Adat Panglima Laot** (in Bahasa)