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After the tsunami : the remaking of everyday life in Banda Aceh, Indonesia

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Introduction

One afternoon in October 2007, during my first week in Aceh and only a couple of days after I moved into the neighborhood in which I would conduct a large part of my research over the next years, I went to the small kiosk where neighbors gathered to relax and chat in the hours before the sundown prayers. I met with the couple who rented the kiosk in which they sold snacks, drinks, detergent and cigarettes, and sat down on one of the small benches that had been put in the shade of a tarpaulin. The middle aged Acehnese man who rented the kiosk told me that it had become quiet in this neighborhood. Many of his friends were gone because of the tsunami. His wife was inside the kiosk, taking care of their eleven month old son. Not much later, several women sat down at the kiosk as well, occasionally buying a drink or a snack. Apart from asking me questions about my presence and country of origin, they talked about the baby, about bus tariffs and about the neighborhood. They discussed who had come back after the tsunami and who had not, talking about the people who were gone and surviving children who now lived with family members elsewhere. One woman approached, holding an envelope. It was addressed to someone in this neighborhood, but she did not know the person. None of the other women recognized the name. They were sure that this person had not lived there before the tsunami. Someone asked the woman with the envelope how she survived and she answered “someone cried that the water was coming and I just ran (*lari*).” They talked about earthquakes. If there would be a heavy earthquake, they would all run. They said they still had *trauma*. One of the women mentioned that her daughter often thought that the earth was shaking while it was not. Someone else brought to mind the false tsunami alarm several months earlier that had made them all run. They told me that it was quiet (*sepi*) here, that few people had returned and that nothing much was going on.

Yet at the same time a lot of things were going on. While the afternoon at the kiosk gave me a first impression of post-tsunami daily life in Aceh, it also showed some of the efforts needed to remake the everyday in the years after the disaster that caused the death of an uncountable number of people and flattened the built environment of coastal Aceh. In this dissertation I focus on this process of the post-disaster remaking of everyday life.

It was on Sunday the 26th of December 2004 around 8 o'clock in the morning that a very heavy earthquake (9.0 on Richter's scale) hit Aceh. People in Banda Aceh told me how they saw the roads going up and down like a wave; that they felt nauseous and could not keep standing on their feet. Virtually no one was aware that this could have been an earthquake under the ocean causing a tsunami. After the earthquake, people went back

home or walked around their neighborhoods to see which houses were damaged. Most people were caught unawares when they heard others call out that the water was rising. While some immediately started to run, others thought this might be a small flood and remained where they were. Only half an hour after the earthquake, the tsunami that hit the Acehese coasts, as well as the North-Sumatran island of Nias, caused unprecedented death and destruction. Later that day the tsunami hit other countries around the Indian Ocean, including Thailand, Sri Lanka and India. The dead were uncountable. For Aceh, conservative estimates put the death toll at 130,000, while others think that at least 200,000 people lost their lives that day.¹ Hundreds of thousands of people survived but lost all their possessions. Many were wounded. On the second day after the tsunami, president Yudhoyono opened up the province for foreign aid – it had been closed off to foreigners because of an ongoing secession conflict. A tremendous aid operation began, not only addressing emergency needs but continuing into the reconstruction period. Huge media campaigns moved governments, companies and individuals all over the world to donate an extraordinary amount of money for post-tsunami recovery.²

The description of the afternoon at the kiosk with which I started this chapter and which is taken from my fieldnotes, presents a particular encounter in time and space; one afternoon, almost three years after the tsunami and only a few days after my arrival in Aceh, in a tsunami affected neighborhood a few kilometers outside of Banda Aceh. Many encounters, observations and conversations would follow. I saw changes over time. More people moved into the neighborhood, while roads and houses were finished and gardens blossomed. Weddings were celebrated, children were born, people started new businesses or finished school. Over time, the tsunami became less prevalent as a topic of daily conversations in Banda Aceh. And yet it was continuously present; as many people kept telling me: it can never be forgotten (*tidak pernah bisa dilupakan*). It remained a presence in many daily encounters and formal gatherings, as well as in the personal conversations that I had with tsunami survivors about the tsunami. In those conversations people told me about the event of the tsunami and its aftermath, about the reconstruction of their houses and livelihoods, about Islam, grieving, and remembering. Post-disaster reconstruction involves more than the physical rebuilding of houses and roads, sewerage systems and electricity. It includes all facets of social life and is an ongoing process, without a demarcated end point,

¹ The one year report of BRR-NAD Nias (the Agency for the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of Aceh and Nias, established by the Indonesian government) and its partners put the death toll on 130,000 with 37,000 people missing (BRR and partners 2005). Later, the number of 167,000 is often mentioned as the official number, for example appearing in the 'Aceh thanks the world' memorial which I describe in the first chapter of this dissertation, but also in other official documents.

² Probably the amount was 13.5 billion US dollar in total (Telford and Cosgrave 2007: 2), of which about 5.8 billion went to the post-tsunami reconstruction in Aceh and Nias (MDF 2007: 1). The World Bank (2008: 9) estimates the total amount of assistance for post-tsunami reconstruction in Aceh at 7.5 billion US dollar.

unfinished in time. To grasp the way in which this process unfolds in the many dimensions of people's lives and lifeworlds, I look at this process as one of 'remaking' (Das et al. 2001) rather than reconstruction.

In 2007 I set out to study post-disaster reconstruction in the "wounded city" (Schneider and Susser 2003) of Banda Aceh by focusing on urban vulnerability and resilience (Vale and Campanella 2005). However, in the course of my research I was struck by people's narratives of the tsunami and by their efforts to remake their everyday lives while dealing with grief, loss and the memories of the landscapes of unrecognizably changed dead bodies. Their stories urged me to look for another theoretical approach to grasp "what really matters" (Kleinman 2006) to people in the process of remaking a world (Das et al. 2001). I found that using the anthropological lens of 'subjectivity' (Biehl et al. 2007a, DelVecchio Good et al. 2008) helped me to foreground exactly those dimensions of the process of remaking everyday life that mattered most to the tsunami survivors in Banda Aceh and to do justice to the way in which reconstruction works.

In this dissertation, I argue that the post-disaster remaking of the everyday can be better understood by looking at emerging subjectivities – the ways in which individuals experience and shape the world in a process that is influenced by their own pasts as well as social and historical factors. What I intend to bring out by drawing from my observations, encounters, and conversations in Banda Aceh, is how people remake their lives in the socio-historical contexts of Islam, Acehnese history and identity, social inequalities, development, and modernity, while at the same time making and remaking these contexts by creatively bringing their personal histories and experiences to bear upon them. This study focuses both on individual people as experiencing subjects and on processes of socio-historical change; more importantly, personal experiences and social changes cannot be understood as separate developments but have to be explored in the ever creative and emerging field of subjectivities in which they keep influencing each other. With this approach, I aim to contribute both to an anthropological understanding of remaking everyday lives in the wake of disaster and to a growing field of Aceh-scholarship that gives insight into how lives are shaped in the context of Aceh's turbulent history, culture, and changing social and political climate. In the rest of this section I will first outline what I think can be the specific contribution of this dissertation to the anthropology of disaster and then introduce some of the concepts that are crucial to my approach: the everyday, subjectivity, narratives, and time.

Subjectivity and the anthropology of disaster

Although social scientists have studied disasters since the early twentieth century (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999), the anthropology of disaster as a sub discipline of anthropology emerged in the 1980s and 90s, focusing on disasters as the coming together of

natural/technological hazards with “a population in a socially and technologically produced condition of environmental vulnerability” (Oliver-Smith 1996: 305). In the 1990s the anthropology of disaster looked at “behavioral responses”, “social changes” and the “political economy of vulnerability” (Oliver-Smith 1996). It has thus contributed to the broader field of disaster studies by bringing in a long-term perspective on how natural hazards become disasters in historically produced patterns of vulnerability, how disasters can bring about social change and how disasters reveal social structures (Hilhorst and Bankoff 2004, Hoffman 1999, Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999, Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002, Oliver-Smith 1999). It has provided significant insights into the rebuilding of communities (e.g. Oliver-Smith 1992), processes of collective memorialization (e.g. Simpson and De Alwis 2008), and ways in which coping with disaster becomes part of cultures (e.g. Bankoff 2003). However, as Frida Hastrup concludes from her study of an Indian fishing village that was affected by the 2004 tsunami, by predefining what the ‘disaster’ is and thus limiting their focus to addressing disasters, anthropological studies of disasters tend to miss the way in which what the disaster is and means is shaped over time and in relation to the everyday (Hastrup 2011). Moreover, I suggest, by focusing primarily on processes of structural social change, the anthropology of disaster has often overlooked individual experience and creativity in post-disaster situations and the way in which this is formed in and in turn shapes social life and historical processes. Instead of doing away with the sub discipline, I suggest that it could be enriched by learning from the anthropology of crisis and social suffering that shows the creativity of everyday life and that is especially elaborated in the work of Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman (Das 2007, Das and Kleinman 2000, 2001).

Taking a cue from this particular field of scholarship, I maintain that the anthropology of disaster could benefit from bringing together two perspectives. The first is a historical focus, including a long-term perspective not only on the aftermath of a particular disaster or the historical and social construction of vulnerability but also on disaster in relation to other (local) crises, their meanings and historiographies. This approach has partly been elaborated in the anthropological work mentioned above. The second is a psychological anthropological perspective that asks how individuals subjectively and intersubjectively deal with disaster. In this dissertation, I suggest that the concept of subjectivity enables us to bring the two perspectives together and thereby grasp how individual experience emerges in historically contingent settings in the process of remaking everyday lives. I argue that studying disaster and post-disaster remaking through a focus on subjectivity will show us not only the long-term social consequences of disasters and give insight into what it means to live a life in the shadow of recent crisis, but also increase our understanding of how crisis and disorder bring to the fore the way in which the individual and social continuously influence, change and remake each other.

Remaking everyday life after the tsunami

More than three years after the tsunami many people told me that things had gone back to normal now (*sudah biasa sekarang*), that everything was just the same (*sama saja*) or back to how it used to be (*seperti dulu*). In January 2008, a neighborhood leader in Banda Aceh told me: “Those [people] who lost a child have a new child, even those who lost their wife have a new wife; those who lost their husband have a new husband (...) it is already like it used to be.” At the same time, people told me of the changes, in their neighborhoods, their city and their lives. Marilyn Ivy has written: “The logic that maintains it is ‘just like it used to be’ surely discloses that it is *not* just like it used to be. Only from the position of loss can one assert that nothing has been lost (...)” (1995: 188). This understanding brings to the fore the way in which the everyday is at once normal and never the same – a characterization that befits the process of remaking everyday life after the tsunami as I encountered it in Banda Aceh.

This dissertation, then, addresses the question of how the losses and changes implicit in the suggestion that things go ‘back to normal’ become part of the remaking of the everyday. The everyday has been analyzed as ungraspable, always escaping, at once a process of repetition and change (Lefebvre 1987) and “insignificant because always before what signifies it” (Blanchot 1987: 16). But although the everyday itself “escapes” (Blanchot 1987), the practices of making and remaking everyday life, central to the work of Michel de Certeau (1984), do not. In lived experience, the everyday becomes temporal, always linked to the past and the future. And its ‘remaking’ becomes particularly actual, present, and pressing through the experience of crisis. Veena Das has beautifully analyzed this process as a “descent into the ordinary” (2007) and (together with others) as the process of remaking a world (Das et al. 2001). The everyday, Das shows, can never be taken for granted; securing it is often an achievement rather than a given (Das 2007). I draw on this body of work to think of remaking as a continuous process in which different temporalities keep coming together in the present; ‘after the tsunami’ implies the ‘before’, but the ordinary and the everyday will, as Marilyn Ivy notes, never be the same.

Das and Kleinman (2001: 6) emphasize that the “the efforts required to produce the everyday” are, just like moments of resistance and change, implicated in the formation of subjectivity. Throughout this dissertation I use the concept of subjectivity as a theoretical approach to understand this process of remaking the everyday. The concept of subjectivity has recently been taken up again and theorized from the perspectives of practice theory (Ortner 2006) and cultural phenomenology and medical anthropology (Biehl et al. 2007a, DelVecchio Good et al. 2008). Both approaches theorize subjectivity as an open-ended concept rather than a “unifying theory” (Biehl et al. 2007b: 15) that can help us understand lived experience as it unfolds in particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. While Ortner (2006) emphasizes power relations in the making of subjectivities, the edited

volumes of Biehl et al. (2007a) and DelVecchio Good et al. (2008) focus on understanding individual everyday experience in the midst of social transformations, defining subjectivity as “the agonistic and practical activity of engaging identity and fate, patterned and felt in historically contingent settings and mediated by institutional processes and cultural forms” (Biehl et al. 2007b: 5) and seeking to explore “dimensions of social life as lived experience” (Good et al. 2008: 2). Furthermore, the introductions to these volumes emphasize that addressing “disorders” is crucial to understanding subjectivity (Good et al. 2008) and that the “[e]xamination of the complex ways in which people’s inner states reflect lived experience within everyday worlds as well as within temporary spaces and transitions – moments of crisis and states of exception – can disturb and enlarge presumed understandings of what is socially possible and desirable.” (Biehl et al. 2007b: 5). A focus on subjectivity therefore gives insight into disorder and the everyday – a relation that is central to the processes described and analyzed in this dissertation. Throughout the dissertation, but especially in chapter two, I direct attention to the ways in which subjectivities emerge in relation to the embodied experiences of crisis and disorder. It is in the many stories of bodies-out-of-place – wounded, dead, transformed, naked, and missing bodies – that the disaster becomes most strikingly defined as an out-of-the-ordinary event both in relation to the “descent into the ordinary” (Das 2007) that is part of the emerging post-tsunami subjectivities and to those dimensions of the everyday that cannot be remade.

Of particular relevance for what I aim to show in this dissertation is the way in which the concept of subjectivity makes it possible to grasp the arena and process in which individuals at once shape and are shaped by larger contexts. In this way subjectivity “places the political at the heart of the psychological and the psychological at the heart of the political.” (Good et al. 2008: 3). Moreover, the ethnography of subjectivity foregrounds “what matters most in people’s lives in the making and unmaking of meaning” (Biehl et al. 2007b: 15). For these multiple reasons, I find this approach particularly fitting for the exploration of the different meanings of the post-disaster ‘remaking’ of everyday life in Aceh. I realize that life is always more complex than our concepts can describe (Desjarlais 2012), but, as I hope will become clear in the course of this dissertation, in the concept of subjectivity I find a useful tool to explore some of these complexities, by looking at what matters to people in a way that is open-ended rather than seeking conclusive answers.

In my exploration of the creation of subjectivities in the remaking of everyday lives, narratives are central. I look at narrative experiences (Steadly 1993) to grasp how experience is at once the foundation of narratives and created through them. Narratives are crucial to the making and remaking of people’s lifeworlds and, more generally, to social life as such because creating a narrative, making a meaningful plot out of experiences, is the basis of our capacity to understand others (Mattingly 2008). Narratives or stories are fundamental ways of making sense of experience and of giving “form to feeling”, thereby

allowing an audience to imagine what something feels like (Garro and Mattingly 2000: 11).³ Narratives are temporal and bring together times and temporalities. The tsunami, the ‘before the tsunami’, and the ‘after the tsunami’ come together in tsunami narratives in the present – which I explore in chapter two – and enable imaginaries of the future – which is the topic of chapter five. However, the ethnography of subjectivity, importantly, has to pay attention to the hidden and unspoken as well (Good et al. 2008, Good 2012), something which I do especially in chapter two when I pay attention to embodiment and “subjunctivizing elements” in narratives – elements that show the multiple possibilities of what could have happened and what could still happen (Good 1994), in chapter three on silences and grieving and in chapter four when I discuss the politics of remembering and forgetting in public space. The concepts of time and temporality are given a central place throughout this dissertation in which I treat time as an ‘actor’. Throughout the different chapters I show how time acts on the remaking of everyday life through processes of remembering and forgetting, historical imagination, ideas about the future, embodied space, religious practices and narrative experiences of the tsunami.

Time is also central to the narrative of this dissertation. I formed my analysis somewhere between hearing people’s stories and writing about them, but in retelling the stories these moments become less neatly separated in time, which resonates with Mary Steedly’s reflection: “It is nearly impossible for me now to distinguish the two moments of event and of interpretation, which are joined in my retelling. Their mutually authenticating synthesis creates *for me* as author a kind of narrative plausibility that entraps me in the allegorical field of my own making.” (1993: 32, emphasis in original). In this dissertation I therefore present a narrative that is embedded in my own experience and I attempt to “retell stories in a fashion that will provoke a meaningful experiential response and understanding in the reader” (Good 1994: 140). In the following sections I will pay more attention to my epistemological position by reflecting on empathy, emotions, experience and the field, exploring the ‘field’ as it emerged through my different fieldwork periods.⁴

Experiential encounters, creating the field and producing knowledge

If fieldwork is made up of “experiential encounters” (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009) then my fieldwork in Aceh started in Yogyakarta. Before going to Aceh for the first time in 2007, I followed two weeks of advanced language training in Yogyakarta, where I had done the fieldwork for my Master’s thesis the year before. In Yogyakarta, I met with professor

³ Garro and Mattingly (2000) point out that although some authors try to clearly define the differences between ‘narratives’ and ‘stories’, in general they are often used interchangeably. In this dissertation I will use both terms interchangeably, although I tend to use the term ‘stories’ to point at people’s narrations of the tsunami.

⁴ This dissertation is mainly based on the fieldwork I did in and around Banda Aceh from October 2007 to March 2008, between February and August 2009, in May/June 2010 and in January 2012.

Setiawan, a geographer who was involved in a comparative research project about post-tsunami reconstruction in Aceh and post-earthquake reconstruction in Yogyakarta (see Setiawan 2007). One afternoon he introduced me to his student and assistant Medi, and to Medi's girlfriend Maya, who were both from Aceh. It was a very pleasant meeting that would not only result in a warm friendship, but also strongly influence the course of my fieldwork. Medi and Maya asked me what they could help me with and I replied that I would like to live with an Acehnese family during my stay in Aceh. On our next meeting, just before I left for Aceh, they told me that both of their families would be happy to take me in.

In Aceh I found out that their families did not take me in as a renter or temporary guest, but as a family member – a relationship that grew over time as I alternately lived with both families. As a member of the household, I helped out with small tasks and shared in everyday discussions, gossip, news and stories. I joined the families at wedding parties and was treated as a family member on the occasion of the weddings of their children (my host brothers and sisters). Apart from getting close to the nuclear families, over time I also became part of the extended families including grandmothers, uncles, aunts and cousins. I was invited to feel at home in grandmother's house and was welcomed by family members in different places in Aceh, Medan, Jakarta, Yogyakarta and West-Java. In turn, I have not only made an effort to be a good family member, but also came to feel part of these families – and I still do.⁵ These intimate acquaintances, established through the mutual effort of becoming family, gave us “co-presence” rather than leaving me out as an “observer” (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009: 14).

The family-membership gave me a position in Banda Aceh that offered access to all kinds of people, places, information, and, most of all, taught me a lot about living in Aceh, as I lived with my families through periods of loss and grief, happiness, anxiety, doubt and gratitude. Over time, I not only better understood these emotions and reactions, but at times also came to experience them myself together with my family members and interlocutors. This is what Davies (2009b) has called “altered perception”, a common experience in long-term ethnographic fieldwork. As we cooked, watched television, read the newspaper, discussed the garden and laughed with the neighbor's children, I slowly immersed in ‘the field’, while at the same time creating what ‘the field’ would be. The field, Davies (2009a: 24) writes, should be understood in “psychological rather than geographical terms”, thereby emerging wherever one experiences it to be. In this way I felt that the field was emerging through my ethnographic practices and my “experiential encounters” rather than being out there already, waiting to be discovered.

⁵ Shiraishi (1997: 68) analyzes how the family sphere in Indonesia “is inherently extendible and is extended, well beyond its immediate biological family and relatives, to include anyone who accepts the “family” values and relations.” This Indonesian flexibility of who counts as ‘family’ has surely played a role in my position in my Acehnese families.

However, as many ethnographers experience, immersion in the field also brought dissonance and disorientation (Davies 2009b). Reading back my diary entries of the beginnings of both fieldwork periods, I recognize doubts and frustrations, strategies of withdrawal (such as reading novels I brought from home) as well as happiness and relief when being welcomed, helped and especially when I sensed that I was understanding others or when I was being understood. The production of anthropological knowledge is always relational, subjective, and intersubjective, with subjectivity not undermining knowledge production, but being its very basis. And not only do emotions not necessarily hinder us in finding knowledge, understanding may be created through them (Davies 2009a). The data I present in this dissertation are created through my interaction with others. The knowledge that is created through these interactions, is influenced not only by my identity in the field (as emphasized in the “reflexive turn” of the 1980s and 1990s, Davies 2009a: 1), but also through my “*states of being* during fieldwork” (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). The fieldworker’s emotions play a role not only during the application of self-contained methods (such as interviews), but especially also when one is not actively applying these (*ibid.*). I think this approach is a most welcome enrichment of understanding knowledge production in ethnographic fieldwork. Let me therefore now reflect first on my social positioning in the field and how that positioning has affected the way in which I got to know the field and then say a few more words about emotion – focusing especially on the role of empathy in understanding and being understood.

Position in the field

“Why don’t you become Muslim, marry an Acehnese man and live in Aceh forever?” people in Aceh frequently asked me. The question was often a well meant attempt to include me. Yet it also pointed at my ‘otherness’, at aspects of my identity that crucially influenced my position in the field, the kind of encounters I had, the knowledge that I found through these encounters and ultimately the narrative that I present in this dissertation. In this section I address the most important of these aspects.

That I came to Aceh alone, without fellow students, and as an unmarried young woman, was often perceived as a brave thing to do (*berani*). People usually understood immediately that this research was part of my studies, since Indonesian students regularly have to do fieldwork as well. However, they thought that travelling so far from home was brave not only because of my age and because I was alone, but perhaps most importantly because of my gender. My gendered position as a woman influenced the research in many ways. Although I interviewed men and women and also spoke frequently with men in everyday conversation (such as with neighbors, family members, and husbands or boyfriends of my female friends), I certainly missed out on a lot of male talk, especially concerning taboo topics. Yet, I have spent more time with women in women’s spaces

talking about their lives and female problems than a male researcher could probably do. Being a young and unmarried woman may have restricted my mobility, especially at night. But I sense that this status also importantly contributed to my status in my host families. It brought them in a position in which they could easily take me into their care and in which others could easily understand this.

As Islam is a central dimension of everyday life in Aceh, I was regularly confronted with the fact that I am not a Muslim. Although well meant, the continuously repeated question of whether I would become Muslim was at times also frustrating.⁶ As a non-Muslim, I did not have access to certain knowledge and spaces that a Muslim researcher would have. On a more positive note however, people were often inclined to explain their beliefs, rituals and other Islamic practices or aspects of their Islamic identity in detail, presuming that I did not know anything about Islam. In general, this was very helpful. I found that a final important aspect of my identity was that I am Dutch, which regularly evoked the association with the colonial past. When I first met someone, he or she would often ask whether I had already visited the *Kerkhoff Poucut* (the Dutch graveyard) where my 'forefathers' were buried. Many people commented upon what was left of the Dutch in Aceh and emphasized that our countries were 'friends' now. My nationality often opened up possibilities for small talk because most people knew something about the Netherlands or came up with questions about my country of origin.

Nevertheless, being from the West, from the former colonizing country, and being economically advantaged made the inequalities between me and the people in my 'field' undeniable. The economic advantage enabled me to travel between the Netherlands and Aceh several times. Friends, host family members and neighbors in Aceh have often told me how much they would like to visit me in the Netherlands, but that considering the financial impossibility of such a visit they could just hope that I would return to Aceh soon. Moreover, doing research and the unequal 'exchange' that it implied, brought the inequalities to the fore. Like other ethnographers, I experienced feelings of guilt at not being able to sufficiently explain to myself and others what the contribution of my coming and going would be (other than the dissertation), how it would address social inequalities, how I could make a difference (cf. Smith and Kleinman 2009). And yet, as Lindsay Smith experienced, these feelings are part of recognizing our role as fieldworkers, may lead to ethical action, and are always already part of moral empathy (*op. cit.*: 179). Out of a sense of responsibility, but at least as much if not more, out of the deeply felt wish to continue my social relationships, over the last years I have continued engagements to stay part of the

⁶ However, for some reason, which may be related to my gender or position in the host families, I seem to have encountered less anti-Western and anti-Christian sentiments than some of the other foreign researchers in Aceh.

local world that emerged as my 'field', of which I had become a part and which had become part of my life.

Empathy and emotional recognition

June 27, 2009 was a festive day. Early in the morning I went with one of my host families to the famous *Baiturrahman* mosque for the official wedding of my host brother. The two subsequent wedding parties that are part of the ritual festivities of one wedding would be the next day and the next week; the official religious ceremony took place this morning. I had been involved in the preparations of the different parts of the wedding for months. Although I had been a guest at many wedding parties, I had never witnessed an official wedding ceremony in a mosque before and I was excited both to be part of this and to enter the legendary mosque. In my diary that day I wrote in detail about the proceedings of the wedding, but what I remember most is what happened right after the ceremony was finished. After the women had congratulated the bride and the men had congratulated the groom, official photographs were taken in a side part of the mosque. Family and friends posed with the couple and went home. At a certain moment, almost everybody had left and we had to hurry up because the next wedding ceremony was beginning right next to us. One of my host sisters called out that there was no picture of the nuclear family yet and while being urged to leave the mosque the nuclear family quickly gathered for the picture. While I observed them from the stairs on the outside, my host father hurried towards me and pulled me to the scene, saying that since I was part of his family, I had to be in this picture. I still vividly remember that I was strongly moved and I wrote in my diary that of all my time in Aceh I had never so strongly felt to be part of something, to be accepted.

Upon arriving home, I changed my dress and hurried on to another, and quite different, wedding party. This was the party of a friend's relative that was held in a tsunami aid house in one of the neighborhoods in which I conducted my research. It was a small party with only about three hundred guests (which is relatively few in Aceh) and my friend was part of the group of women who did the cooking. She had urged me several times to bring my photo camera and to come early. Upon my arrival the bride asked me to take pictures and even though my skills as a photographer are fairly limited I whole-heartedly set about the task. After all, having been present at quite a few parties already, I knew by then that the photographs were an essential part of the wedding itself and there seemed to be no one else around to take them. I took pictures of the food, of several family members together, of the arrival of the groom and his family, of the gifts they brought and of a subsequent series of rituals (*peusijeuk*). Many aspects of the process seemed much more modest than at some other wedding parties I had attended: the number of guests, the number of gifts, the women's dresses, and the absence of music, dancers, and a professional photographer. As is usual in Acehnese wedding rituals (according to Acehnese *adat*,

customs) the groom's relatives ate inside the house where the couple was seated on a specially decorated platform. When the rituals and the meal were over, and the room became empty, I set about taking a few pictures of the couple themselves. However, after taking a first picture, the bride said, suddenly and in a rather resigned mood, "Anne, why do you have to do this? We are already old." The groom just sat quietly. I felt a bit confused since she herself had asked me to take pictures, but I also felt sad, as I suddenly strongly sensed that this party was not a happy one. I went outside where the bride's sister in law told me that the couple had been widow and widower and I realized that this was what the bride had meant when she said that they were old.

Contributions to a recent edited volume by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer (*Emotions in the Field* 2009) provide insight into the ways in which ethnographers can learn, gain knowledge, through their emotions in the field. If anything, the confusion and sadness I experienced in the above described moment at the second wedding party brought home to me the complexity and difficulty of post-tsunami remaking. But did I really get the situation 'right' (Hastrup 2004)? And if so, right for whom? Was this a happy or a sad event, or both, or neither? And, what about that morning in the mosque; does my happy feeling of belonging say anything about the feelings of my host family members? For sure, there may have been many reasons for wanting me to appear in that picture. Can we ever really understand the emotions of another person? The least we can do is search for 'crossing-points' between ourselves and others; common reality and moral ground in which we can recognize each other. Empathy, I have come to learn, is crucial in ethnographic fieldwork. Moral empathy, Smith and Kleinman propose, refers to the "shared stakes that bind us to our informants and our fieldwork sites." (Smith and Kleinman 2009: 172). It is the common reality of moral action that becomes especially clear in moments of emotional recognition (Smith and Kleinman 2009).

In thinking about emotions, I follow Davies (2009a: 25) and Jackson (2009: 35) in asserting that "feelings simply cannot be reduced to either culture or phylogeny." Emotions are not just cultural constructions; it is from human relations that new experience emerges. But neither is empathy necessarily based on homologous experiences (Throop 2010b). As Michael Jackson has put it: "[t]o participate in the lives of others, in another society, is to discover the crossing-points where one's own experience connects with theirs – the points at which sameness subsumes difference." (Jackson 2009: 47). Empathy, then, is crucial to understanding, and is created at these crossing-points, neither requiring homologous experiences, nor being unreachable because of cultural differences. It is the "vicissitudes of empathy" that we should be aware of, as our intersubjective engagements can always generate empathic resonance as well as dissonance and confusion (Throop 2010b). Crucially, empathic work is embedded in the intersubjective encounter, depending not only on the ethnographer's intention to understand but also on the other's intention to be

understood (Hollan 2008). Understanding is therefore always created in ongoing dialogue in the intersubjective encounter. In chapter three, I will return to the debate on culture and emotions in more detail. Here, I want to emphasize the role of empathy in gaining knowledge as well as the importance of our own emotions in this process. What I want to point out is that our emotions in the field can teach us about the lifeworlds of people with whom we engage – both when we are in the field and when we reflect on these emotions later – even if they do so in ambiguous and uncertain ways. At the wedding parties I learned about family relations and their representations, about belonging, ambiguity, and remaking (social) life. Even if this kind of understanding is always incomplete, raising new questions rather than offering straightforward answers, it is crucial to the anthropological effort to understand other people's lifeworlds. It is through the (inherently temporal) experience and accumulation of many moments such as the ones at the wedding parties I described above that a field opens up; a field of possibilities for empathic resonance as well as dissonance and, therefore, emotional recognition.

Doing research in Banda Aceh

Both of my host families lived in tsunami affected neighborhoods. The first neighborhood, some kilometers outside of Banda Aceh, had been totally destroyed by the disaster. When I arrived there in October 2007 many families had already moved into their newly built tsunami aid houses, but quite a number of houses still stood empty, ruins of old houses still stood between the new buildings and the roads had not been paved with asphalt yet – in the rainy season they changed into pools of mud. When I returned in 2009, much had changed: roads had been paved with asphalt, more people had moved in, many had changed their houses and gardens and more regular social activities colored neighborhood life. My other family lived in a neighborhood not far from Banda Aceh's city centre. Part of it (the streets that were nearest to the sea) had been totally destroyed, while the other half was severely damaged. Here, by 2007 most people had returned and a vibrant neighborhood life had re-emerged. Both neighborhoods lost many residents due to the tsunami and both saw many newcomers move in during the years in which I did my fieldwork.

During my first fieldwork period, from October 2007 until March 2008, I had many conversations primarily in the two neighborhoods in which I lived. In the first weeks I got to know the neighborhood and neighbors by walking around and through "deep hanging out" (Clifford 1997: 56), sitting with the women on their verandas in the late afternoon – something I continued to do throughout my fieldwork. Later, I did in-depth, tape-recorded, interviews with tsunami survivors; men and women, sometimes in small groups. These interviews were all in the national language, Indonesian. Although Acehnese is the first language of many people in Aceh, Indonesian is the official language of schools, public

service, offices and newspapers. In Banda Aceh, almost everyone speaks Indonesian fluently and in daily life people easily switch between Acehnese and Indonesian. The interviews were largely unstructured and I found that most people were not only willing to talk about the tsunami and reconstruction process, but were full of stories of which I sensed that they indeed wanted to share them with me, which people sometimes made explicit by pointing out that they wanted to help me or that they wanted me to bring their stories to the Netherlands. My continuous presence in the neighborhoods and the fact that I lived with respected families helped both in gaining access to people and in continuing these relationships. Even before we met, people often already knew who I was and what I was doing and only rarely did I have to explain that I did not work for an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization), which is what most foreigners were associated with at the time. Some people explicitly said that they were quite happy to help me with my research in this way. Indeed, some framed it as returning a favor to the foreign countries that had come to their assistance after the tsunami – casting me as a representative of these countries.⁷ I found that many people did want to talk about their painful experiences and about the problems they experienced in the reconstruction process, but I want to emphasize that I never came to think of these conversations as therapeutic – as has sometimes been suggested. I think of them rather as ‘engagements’ and therefore necessarily also moral acts (Smith and Kleinman 2009). Most of these conversations, both the informal chatting and the tape-recorded interviews, took place in the late afternoon, between the afternoon prayer (*asar*) and the sunset prayers (*maghrib*) as this is the time in which most people return from work, have finished daily chores and have time to informally chat with their neighbors or sit quietly in front of their homes (*santai*, relaxed).

I interviewed men and women, civil servants, housewives, students, *becak*-drivers, shopkeepers, and village leaders. Yet, I did feel that the middle and upper middle classes, mainly civil servants and successful entrepreneurs, were overrepresented in my research during my first stay.⁸ Therefore, during my second fieldwork period, from February to August 2009, I shifted the focus to two other neighborhoods, a relatively poor fishermen’s neighborhood in Banda Aceh and a relocation site fifteen kilometers out of town. Again, I talked with people from different backgrounds and with different occupations, but now many of my interlocutors worked in the informal sector or were unemployed. Since I had accessed both of these neighborhoods with the help of some of my old friends, I soon felt at

⁷ Though I disputed this at first, as I felt I had nothing to do with the humanitarian assistance and it felt embarrassing to be thanked for something I had not done, I later came to understand that this reciprocity was not particularly about me, but about a more general effort of building international relationships (see chapter one).

⁸ This may not be surprising since of all Aceh poverty is lowest in Banda Aceh (Miller and Bunnell 2010: 12). However, the wide range of different occupations that is characteristic of urban areas makes the difference in levels of income and wealth in Banda Aceh perhaps all the more striking and, I sensed, in need of a more balanced representation in my research focus.

ease there as well, not surprising people with my presence. In addition, in 2009, I conducted several interviews with Chinese-Indonesians living in the city centre. During these two fieldwork periods I did a total of 84 tape-recorded interviews with tsunami survivors, not including the many more informal conversations. I did about 25 interviews with local, national and international NGO-workers, up to ten interviews with BRR (the national agency that coordinated reconstruction in Aceh, see chapter one) and local government officials and a few with Acehnese academics. Although initially I set out to pay more or less equal attention to different social actors in the reconstruction process (especially local survivors, NGO-workers and government officials) I soon decided to shift the emphasis to tsunami survivors and their process of post-tsunami remaking. Reasons for that decision were that this was the part that I found most interesting, that my access to the tsunami survivors was better than to the other groups, and that I felt that I would need much more time for research to include all the other actors in an in-depth and honest way. The focus on tsunami survivors is reflected in the material presented in this dissertation.

Exploring the city

During my first fieldwork period I explored the city by minibus (in Aceh called *labi-labi*), *becak* (motorcycle rickshaw) and by foot. This way of going around had several advantages. Not only did I have many informal conversations in the minibus and *becak*, walking through the neighborhood and from the minibus stop to the neighborhood gave ample opportunity to stop by or be called in to sit a while on people's verandas or in front of a little shop. I got to know the city through the bus lines. On the downside, however, getting somewhere and back took a lot of time, it was difficult to go out at night, and visiting someone inside a neighborhood, far away from access to public transportation, was difficult. Therefore, in 2009 I decided to learn to drive the motorcycle, and this skill provided me with a very different perspective on the city. Now, I easily drove through all kinds of streets and different places away from the main roads, where I had not gone before. I could stop by shops and friends' houses easily and at any time. The motorcycle made it much easier to look around in parts of the city where I had no appointments – just driving around to see what they looked like and now and then stopping to have a little chat with residents.

Over the years, I saw the city change. Not only physically, with new roads, buildings, parks, houses and recreational places being constructed, but also socially, with more and more people driving cars and motorcycles, hanging out in the afternoon and at night in the increasing number of roadside cafés, enjoying time at the beaches and parks with their children, engaging in small businesses such as making homemade juices or pizzas, playing (indoor) football with friends, shopping in the newly built shopping mall and boutiques and spending time in internet cafés or, more and more, in wifi areas. Increasingly, there

were traffic jams on the roads around the main roundabout in the city centre (*simpang lima*) and around the famous Great Mosque (*Mesjid Raya Baiturrahman*).

Many shops are located in the central area of Banda Aceh, around the river (*Krueng Aceh*), between the mosque on one side of the river and the oldest business area (*Peunayong*) on the other. The central stretch of grass *Blang Padang* (historical home of official gatherings), the playing garden *Taman Sari*, the Tsunami Museum, the city hall, the old Dutch graveyard *Kerkhoff*, and the historical *Putroe Phang* garden⁹ are all located south of the mosque. Driving southwards, past *Putroe Phang* garden, one enters neighborhoods unaffected by the tsunami, some of which became popular residential and work areas for foreign aid organizations. The area west of the *Baiturrahman* mosque, towards the coastal harbor of *UleeLheue* was largely destroyed by the tsunami. Along the very broad new road that has been constructed between the city centre and *UleeLheue*, many buildings that combine houses and shops (*ruko*, *rumah-toko*), with the store downstairs and people living upstairs, have been constructed in recent years. Also located along the road is Banda Aceh's largest mass grave, in which thousands of bodies lay buried. The road ends at the famous *Baiturrahim* mosque, which suffered severe damage but was one of the few buildings still standing after the disaster, and the *Uleelheue* harbor and newly constructed waterfront. The *Krueng Aceh* river runs north from the city centre towards the sea. Alongside it we find Banda Aceh's oldest neighborhoods; *Kampong Jawa*, *Kampong Pande*, the fishermen's neighborhood *Lampulo* and, in the city centre, *Peunayong*, the shopping and business district in which most of the Chinese-Indonesian residents live. All of these neighborhoods were severely or partly affected by the tsunami. One of Banda Aceh's most important roads runs north-east, from the city centre to the university district (*Darussalam*). The main public hospital, the office of the governor and the provincial police headquarters are all located along this road. It is more or less the border which was reached by the tsunami water; while the area north-west of the road was severely damaged or destroyed, the area south-east of it remained largely unaffected. Inland, to the east, we find the *Ulee Kareng* neighborhood, famous for its coffee, and finally, to the south-east, a new area that has been developed in recent years. Here, the reconstructed soccer stadium, the new bus terminal, some government offices and new roads, shops and houses should become the new, second, city centre.

The intention to make this a new centre was conveyed to me by the director of the Banda Aceh's urban planning agency (Bappeda, *Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah*, kota Banda Aceh) in an interview in 2009. One of Banda Aceh's problems, he told

⁹ This garden houses the interesting mountain-shaped construction called *gunongan*. The story goes that the famous Sultan Iskandar Muda built it in the early seventeenth century for his favorite wife (Putroe Phang) because of her homesickness. It is likely that it has also been used as a place of justice and execution (Wessing 1988). Discerning Hindu elements in the construction and based on written historical sources Wessing suggests that it may have been built before the seventeenth century (*ibid.*).

me, is its relatively small size (little more than 60 square kilometers). This is a disadvantage, since size is one of the factors based on which the city's budget is assigned by the central government. The other factors, population, development and location also do not help much to increase the budget. With 212,241 residents in 2009,¹⁰ Banda Aceh is only an 'intermediate' city and its location is relatively strategic instead of remote. In practice, the city extends across the borders into the neighboring district of Aceh Besar, as more and more people live outside Banda Aceh's borders, but the administrative borders stay the same.¹¹ However, the population is growing and activities increase. Therefore, the urban administration aimed to develop this new 'centre' near its south-eastern borders. An additional advantage, the director said, was that this area would be safe in case of future tsunamis.

The director of the Bappeda had started our conversation with an introduction to the history of Banda Aceh. He told me how Banda Aceh had once been the main centre of trade in the region. This ended, he said, when Banda Aceh was included in Indonesia. As we will see in the first and the last chapter of this dissertation, this historical narrative – in which Aceh (or Banda Aceh) was once a vibrant trade hub, only to be closed off from its international relations when it was incorporated in the Netherlands Indies and later became part of Indonesia – is a central narrative in which many people in Aceh now imagine its 'place-in-the-world' (Ferguson 2006) and therefore also what 'Aceh' itself is or should be. Because I will be concerned with this narrative in several parts of this dissertation, in the following section I will give a brief historical overview of Aceh. In doing so, I will draw out especially the long history of violence, the importance of Islam to the region, the historical place of the Acehnese sultanates and the emergence of Acehnese nationalism. I found these historical dimensions to be particularly significant to the unfolding social realities and emerging subjectivities that I explore in this dissertation.

A brief introduction to the history of Aceh

The province of Aceh has presently more than 4 million residents,¹² of which the great majority is Muslim. The Acehnese form the largest ethnic group, living mostly along the Acehnese coast. Javanese migrants are the largest ethnic minority, followed by the Gayo (about 200,000 people) who originate from the highlands around the city of Takengon, and a few smaller minority groups, amongst others Chinese-Indonesians who mostly live in

¹⁰ BPS Kota Banda Aceh (2010).

¹¹ The director suggested that one reason for this was that these areas of Aceh Besar were relatively productive in economic terms. Therefore Aceh Besar did not want to lose them to Banda Aceh. The possible extension of Banda Aceh's boundaries into Aceh Besar has been a cause of tensions between the two districts over the last few years.

¹² The province had a population of 4,363,477 in 2009 (BPS 2010).

Banda Aceh (Reid 2006: 5-6). The local language, Acehnese, is the everyday language of many Acehnese people, but Indonesian, the language of education, government, and media is also widely spoken, especially in the capital, Banda Aceh. Many of Banda Aceh's residents work in civil service or other service jobs in the formal or informal sector. In rural Aceh, agriculture (rice in the lowlands and, amongst others, coffee and pepper in the highlands) and fishery are important sources of income.¹³ Many Acehnese identify Islam, but also *adat* (customs), as crucial parts of Acehnese identity. *Adat* is not only found in official ceremonies, such as weddings, but also, for example, in the often discussed tradition of matrilocality, in which daughters inherit the house and husbands move in with their family in law (Siapno 2002: 59-63, Siegel 2000[1969]: 51-52), and in community organization at a *gampong* (neighborhood) level. Aceh's history, which is popularly seen and even self-ascribed as one of violence and resistance (Feener 2011: 15), but also one of global connections, is central to Acehnese identity and has attracted more and more scholarly attention in recent years (Feener 2011).

The first Acehnese Sultanates emerged in the early sixteenth century. Before that time the area, due to its strategic position, had long been involved in global connections (McKinnon 2006, Perret 2011). The first Islamic kingdom in Southeast Asia was found in Pasai, near the present-day North-Acehnese city of Lhokseumawe, in the thirteenth century. In the early sixteenth century the Sultanate of Aceh was established on the remains of the ancient kingdom of Lamri (present day Banda Aceh). It gained strength in a successful effort to push out Portuguese invaders in the name of Islam (Reid 2006a) and in the 1520s successfully took neighboring cities and kept expanding Aceh's domain (Riddell 2006: 39). Over the following century Aceh became an important force in the global pepper trade and traders from different European countries visited the Sultanate. In the 1560s Aceh established especially warm diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire, which provided the Acehnese with military assistance. Thereby, Aceh, without paying tribute, seemed to become a kind of vassal of the Ottoman Empire, which was probably part of a broader aspiration of belonging to a worldwide Islamic caliphate (Reid 2005). Aceh is still popularly referred to as *Serambi Mekkah* (the verandah of Mecca), an identification that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries portrayed Aceh's status as mirroring Mecca and thereby moved "Aceh well beyond its own Malay region to assume a prominent role on the world Islamic stage." (Riddell 2006: 49).

When people in Aceh refer to its 'glorious history' or 'golden age' they most often invoke the time of Sultan Iskandar Muda (who reigned from 1607 to 1636). He is remembered for the Islamization in the region (Feener 2011), building mosques and setting up an Islamic judicial system (Reid 2005: 143). Commercial trade flourished under his

¹³ In 2009 almost half of the Acehnese working population worked in the agricultural and fishing sectors (*pertanian*), while almost twenty percent worked in the service sector (BPS 2010).

reign; he was a wealthy, but also particularly cruel Sultan. He was succeeded by his son in law, Sultan Iskandar Thani, whose rule was followed by four successive female rulers, the last of whom was displaced from power in 1699. The pepper trade declined under influence of global developments as well as internal politics (Reid 2005). Also, the power of the Sultanate waned, and shifted to *ulèëbalang*, hereditary rulers who were largely sovereign in their own territories – a system that was still in place in the nineteenth century (*ibid.*). In the nineteenth century trade revived and once again Aceh nurtured its global diplomatic relations (Reid 2006b). The Sultanate remained independent until the start of the Dutch Aceh war in 1873. In that year, the sultan once again called on the Turks for assistance, but received none (Göksoy 2011, Reid 2005: 176). The war, which the Dutch had hoped to win quickly, became a long and very bloody conflict that lasted at least until the young Sultan Daud surrendered in 1903; a victory brought about by several factors, one of which was Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje's famous ethnography (1893) and military advice (Reid 2006C: 101). However, rebellions and individual murders continued to ensure that Dutch rule was never secure in Aceh until the invasion of the Japanese in 1942 ended this rule altogether.

During the Aceh war, the *ulama*, religious scholars, had come to play a defining role in resistance against the Dutch, framing the war as a holy war against unbelievers, rather than just a form of resistance against the occupation of Aceh (Reid 2006c: 99, Siegel 2000[1969]).¹⁴ The gap between the *ulèëbalang* (the hereditary rulers) and the *ulama* widened as the Dutch subsequently cooperated with the *ulèëbalang* to rule the territory. At the end of the Second World War, in which both *ulama* and *ulèëbalang* sought out cooperation with the Japanese (the Japanese eventually opting for the latter) the *ulama* overruled and ended the rule of the *ulèëbalang* (Reid 2005: 326-8). Between 1945 and 1949 Aceh stayed out of the grip of the returning Dutch and enthusiastically contributed to the formation of the new Indonesian republic. This enthusiasm can be explained not only because the idea of 'Indonesia' was still a relatively empty one, but also, because the Acehnese thought of Indonesia as an Islamic state, thus striving for a large Islamic state that would be part of the global *umma* (Islamic community) (Aspinall 2007a).

Disappointment with the Indonesian Republic, that did not become an Islamic state, and the inclusion of Aceh in the province of North Sumatra led to the *Darul Islam* rebellion (1953-1962). Although leaders of the rebellion wanted Aceh to remain separate from North-Sumatra, their goal was not Acehnese independence but Islamization of Indonesia. The conflict ended with the assignment of a special region status to Aceh, in which it was granted autonomy in religious, cultural and educational affairs as long as these

¹⁴ The famous and popular *Hikayat Prang Sabi*, Story of the Holy War, from that time, inspired young men with descriptions of paradise – which one could reach by fighting the Holy War (Siegel 2000[1969], 1979, Hadi 2011).

were not in contradiction with the Indonesian law. In 1976 a new rebellion movement emerged, again framed in terms of disappointment with Indonesia, one reason being that the Indonesian state appropriated Aceh's natural resources, while hardly returning any of the revenues.¹⁵ This new movement, which later became the Free Aceh Movement (GAM, *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*), was linked to the earlier *Darul Islam* because many of the protagonists, or their fathers, had been part of *Darul Islam* (Aspinall 2009). However, GAM, which was established and led by Hasan di Tiro, strove for Acehnese independence. It built on a nationalist ideology according to which, di Tiro argued, GAM represented the legitimate heir of the last Acehnese Sultanate, which had never been fully conquered by the Dutch and illegitimately transferred to what GAM referred to as the new 'colonizer', Indonesia (Aspinall 2007a).

During the 1970s and 80s, the guerrilla led by GAM was relatively small, but this changed after GAM fighters received military training in Libya at the end of the 1980s (Schulze 2006). Between 1989 and 1998 the Indonesian army led a violent counter-insurgency in Aceh, commonly referred to as *DOM* (*Daerah Operasi Militer*). Most of the many human rights violations of this period became exposed only after the fall of Suharto in 1998. Then, many people in Aceh as well as in GAM looked hopefully to East Timor, which became independent in 1999 after a referendum. But the Indonesian government did not intend to let Aceh go, being afraid of "balkanization" (Miller 2009: 89). Nevertheless, peace negotiations took place between January 2000 and May 2003. During those years there were two periods of cease fire; the Humanitarian Pause (May 2000 – January 2001) and the Cessation of Hostilities (December 2002 – May 2003). In 2001 Aceh was granted special autonomy, after which Shari'a (Islamic law) could be implemented in the province.

GAM's political strategy was, especially after 1998, mostly focused on internationalization of the conflict, which became most clear during this period of peace negotiations (Schulze 2006). Aspinall argues convincingly that internationalization of the struggle was necessary from the start because GAM aspired to an independent nation-state that was recognized by other states in the international system (Aspinall 2002). The nationalist aims of the struggle were therefore cast in the international idiom of sovereignty and self-determination, and later in terms of human rights (*ibid.*). While this politics of internationalization, including an appeal to Western countries, was one reason for GAM's declining emphasis on Islam as its leading ideology, the main reason, Aspinall shows, was that Islam was "a point of commonality, not difference, between Aceh and Indonesia"

¹⁵ Although this grievance over the appropriation of natural resources was an important reason for the emergence of GAM, Aspinall argues that the construction of grievances has to be understood in a larger historical context of identity construction (Aspinall 2007b). More specifically, GAM leaders formulated the idea of grievances in a new context, namely the idea of Acehnese specialness that was to a large extent created through the 'special region' status that ended *Darul Islam* and supported a distinct Acehnese identity (*ibid.*).

(2007a: 247). Emphasizing the Islamic part of the Acehese identity would thus undermine rather than serve the Acehese nationalist cause.

Therefore, the granting of Shari'a is often seen as a tactical move by the Indonesian government to place GAM in a difficult position (Aspinall 2007a, Miller and Feener 2010).¹⁶ For people in Aceh, Islamic piety is closely related to Acehese identity and neither the Acehese civil population nor GAM openly refused the Shari'a offer. Since 2001, an administrative system and rules based on Islamic law have been implemented in Aceh, meaning amongst others that *khalwat* (close proximity between unrelated men and women), gambling and the sale and consumption of alcohol are forbidden, that shops have to be closed during the Friday prayer and that women have to cover their bodies and wear *jilbabs* (headscarves). Punishments by caning have drawn international attention. While almost all, if not all, Muslims in Aceh agree with Shari'a itself, the implementation of the law is often criticized for mainly targeting women and the poor (Miller and Feener 2010: 233-4).

In May 2003 peace negotiations failed and martial law was proclaimed. A bloody counter-insurgency operation followed in which both sides suffered losses, and in which the civil Acehese population suffered from intimidation, extortion, and violence. The province was closed off from the outside world and when the tsunami struck on the 26th of December 2004, hardly any foreign aid organizations or journalists were present. A month after the tsunami, peace negotiations were resumed and led to a peace agreement, which was signed in Helsinki on the 15th of August 2005. The conflict had claimed between 15,000 and 20,000 lives (Miller and Bunnell 2010). While many people in Aceh say that peace was mainly a consequence of the tsunami, structural developments – the political will of the Indonesian leaders (Miller 2009), Indonesian democratic reform, the stalemate situation in which GAM found itself and its realization that the international community was more interested in compromises and peace than in independence (Aspinall 2009) – were probably more important for the conflict to end (*ibid.*). Aceh gained far-reaching autonomy in cultural, economic, religious, political and judicial affairs. It became the only province in which local parties without a national base were allowed to compete in the provincial elections. After the elections of December 2006, former GAM spokesman Irwandi Yusuf became the first post-conflict governor of Aceh and in the regional parliamentary elections of 2009 the local Aceh Party, which was the political successor of GAM, reached a tremendous victory. Although the peace lasts up till this day, the province has not been completely peaceful, with, for example, tensions heightening and violence occasionally erupting again ahead of the April 2012 local elections.

¹⁶ Miller and Feener (2010) show that while during the emergency rule of the Indonesian government in Aceh (before the end of the conflict) many people in Aceh remained skeptical about Shari'a implementation, after the peace agreement state programs for the implementation of Shari'a have become more important and accepted and have come to strengthen the control of the national state in the province.

The post-tsunami and post-conflict climate

My research in Banda Aceh focused on the process of the remaking of everyday life after the tsunami in a period in which both the city and the province went through extraordinary changes, including the political transformations stemming from the peace agreement. The 'post-conflict' and the 'post-tsunami' are crucial parts of Aceh's socio-political 'climate' in recent years. Nevertheless, I think it is not only possible, but also important to look at the differences between these 'post-s'. Although the history of the conflict and ideas about the relation between the tsunami and the peace agreement play a role in several parts of this dissertation, generally I analytically separate the post-conflict and post-tsunami by explicitly focusing on post-tsunami Banda Aceh.

The geographical focus is crucial in this regard. As Miller and Bunnell (2010) point out, there is a wide gap between urban and rural Aceh in the experience of the conflict as well as in the experience of post-tsunami transformations. Residents of Banda Aceh were exposed to far less violence during the conflict than people in Aceh's rural areas. Until 1998, the conflict was limited to the Acehnese countryside, while the city of Banda Aceh was controlled by Suharto's New Order regime (Miller and Bunnell 2010). After 1998, the nation-wide democratization process led to new voices, including those of the separatists, gaining ground in the city. But although the politics of the conflict then moved to the city, in general Banda Aceh was spared the worst of the violence (*ibid.*). The tsunami, by contrast, hit the city extremely hard: 61,065 of the 2004 population of 264,168 died (Nuridin 2006: 117, cited in Miller and Bunnell 2010). Post-tsunami and post-conflict humanitarian assistance were not only largely separated, with the assistance to tsunami victims far exceeding the funding available for conflict victims (Waizenegger and Hyndman 2010), post-tsunami reconstruction focused disproportionately on urban areas, especially Banda Aceh (Miller and Bunnell 2010). Unsurprisingly therefore, during my different stays in Banda Aceh, the tsunami and the post-tsunami reconstruction process received far more attention in everyday conversations than the conflict. If people talked about the conflict it was mainly either in general terms of hoping that it would not return or in relation to specific incidents that took place outside of Banda Aceh.¹⁷

There is another reason to look at the post-tsunami and post-conflict as different 'post-s', which is the different character of tsunami and conflict experience. I am a bit more hesitant to make a clear separation here, not in the last place because I did not do research on conflict experiences, but also because of the diversity of all human experience which

¹⁷ To be sure, there are many more reasons why the tsunami was more prominently present than the conflict in everyday conversations. One reason is my research focus which I made clear from the start. Another may be a relative silencing of the conflict in public discourse, but possibly also in private conversations. I am aware of these other reasons. However, I still maintain that the distinctive experience of Banda Aceh's residents as opposed to people living in Aceh's rural areas also strongly contributes to the relative emphasis on the tsunami as the major event in recent history.

makes it quite problematic to delineate these overlapping and highly diverse histories as different collective experiences. What is clear, however, is that many of my interlocutors made this distinction themselves, pointing out that the *trauma* experienced by conflict victims was different from the tsunami *trauma* because the conflict violence was inflicted by people, while the tsunami had been given by God. As will become clear in this dissertation, the experience of the tsunami and of remaking lives after the tsunami was for many people importantly influenced by the knowledge that the tsunami had been given by God, rather than by people.

In general therefore, I see the post-tsunami and post-conflict in Banda Aceh as entangled but different. I take this analytical stance based both on my encounters in Banda Aceh and on the historical path of the Acehnese capital. These histories are again entangled with other aspects of Banda Aceh's history, not only in people's perceptions of them but also in the continuously evolving political, social, cultural, and economic climate in which I conducted my research. Throughout the dissertation I will write about 'tsunami survivors' as a very loosely defined category, denoting people who felt affected by the tsunami in any way. I use this category as a most encompassing way of writing about the people with whom I did my research and as different from the locally used 'tsunami victim' (*korban tsunami*), which, as I will explain in chapter one, was more narrow and often used to designate the official category of people who were entitled to aid.

Truth, relationality, and the question of what is at stake

In this dissertation I look for answers to the question of how people in Banda Aceh were remaking their everyday lives after the tsunami. What kind of knowledge do I hope to create? How did I come to focus on certain dimensions of post-disaster reconstruction rather than others? And what does my narrative contribute to an anthropological understanding of post-disaster remaking?

In approaching these questions, I build upon recent epistemological perspectives in anthropology that show how anthropological knowledge is not found in evidence about an object 'out there' but is relational; the object of study emerges through our relations with it (Hastrup 2004). Our anthropological narratives, therefore, are not meant to represent the world *as it is*, but neither does just any narrative connect to a social reality (*ibid.*). Our narrative imagination of the relations between individual actions and social life is fundamentally an ethical process, as it reflects the values we give to relations and gives force to our arguments that aim to "connect the 'true' in new ways" (*op. cit.*: 469). In this way we can create the kind of "knowledge that can acknowledge its relationality and still aim for truth" (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009: 8): a truth that is not to be discovered in a detached object but in relations and processes. There is an ethics both to doing fieldwork with its experiential encounters and to writing, creating an anthropological narrative. In

the narrative that is this dissertation, I engage in this ethical process in two ways: firstly, through the range of topics that I chose to present and secondly through the ways in which I present them as well as through my interpretations, analyses, and arguments.

In 1991, Joan and Arthur Kleinman urged anthropologists to turn to the question of “what is at stake” for the people they study (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991, see also Willen and Seeman 2012). They thereby asked anthropologists to “move away from interpretations of culture and toward the interpretation of fraught social engagements.” (Willen and Seeman 2012: 10). It is this question of what is at stake, or “what really matters” (Kleinman 2006), from which I have approached and selected the dimensions of the remaking of everyday life that I discuss in this dissertation. I found that the process of remaking is shot through with Islam. What matters in the lives of tsunami survivors in Banda Aceh is grieving and dealing with memory, acceptance and prayer, the memory of bodies that were never found, the reconstruction of houses, infrastructure, neighborhoods, and educational systems. What is at stake is social change and development, aspirations for the ‘good life’ (Appadurai 2004) framed by Islam and modernity as well as going back to normal, however changed that ‘normal’ may be.

I got to these dimensions through many experiential encounters, through tape-recorded interviews, informal conversations and everyday experiences as well as through serendipity. Much of what we learn by doing ethnographic fieldwork we learn during the moments in which we are not applying “self-contained methods”, such as interviews, but in which we are just relaxing, helping out in the kitchen, joining friends on a Sunday afternoon outing to the beach; in short at all other moments during fieldwork (Davies 2009a). Often, during those moments, we are not looking for information or ‘data’, but we stumble upon something or it comes to us “accidentally” (Spyer 2011). Serendipity is central to the ethnographic method and it is our attunement to the importance of particular serendipitous encounters that can give anthropologists, more than other researchers, insights into dimensions of other people’s lives that would otherwise remain invisible (*ibid.*). It is through this attunement and the openness to the ‘other’, and guided by the question of what is at stake in other people’s lives that I have run across and entered into the dimensions of the remaking of everyday life that I explore in the rest of this dissertation. Through exploring these, and through writing, I have come to particular insights and arguments that form the core of the anthropological contribution of this dissertation. As may be clear by now, I do not seek to give advice on disaster reconstruction management, thereby attempting to ‘improve improvement’ (Li 2007). Rather, with the chapters that follow I not only aim to give insight into what is at stake for people in Aceh, but also what I think should be at stake in our understanding of post-disaster remaking in particular and the creativity of human life in general.

Outline of the dissertation

The following chapters explore different dimensions of the post-tsunami remaking of everyday life in Banda Aceh. Chapter one starts by looking into the complex arena of social actors in the post-tsunami reconstruction process through the lens of people's stories about the first weeks, months, and years. I show how particular subjectivities emerged in the process as tsunami survivors explicitly glossed foreign reconstruction assistance as a gift, while receiving houses from the government was seen as an entitlement. I argue that framing foreign humanitarian aid as a gift was part of a larger process in which people imagined Aceh as finally getting (back) its place in the world through the recognition (through attention and gifts) by the international community after the tsunami.

In chapter two I look at the way in which tsunami experiences become part of the long-term process of remaking lives and society. I focus on the narrative experience of the tsunami, by showing how the narrated event (of the tsunami) and the narrative event (of telling about it) come together in present experience. I show how the body is crucial in these narratives, not only as the site of experience, but also in the stories about the tsunami and as the tool through which the out-of-the-ordinary tsunami is framed in relation to the remaking of everyday life.

Chapter three explores the subjective ways in which people dealt with loss, memories and emotions. For many people in Banda Aceh this process was crucially tied to Islam. Embodied and narrated experiences of *trauma* and *stres*, religious dispositions, practices and figures, and materialities and their absences discussed in this chapter all point to the way in which the social world shapes experience and narration, while they also point out how individuals subjectively navigate through the social world and remake it in their own ways. Through the processes and practices of grieving people were finding ways to give memory a place so as to 'not always' remember.

Both chapter three and chapter four show that memory is one of the important places where time and subjectivity come together. Chapter four focuses on processes of remembering and forgetting in urban space, thereby pointing out how temporalities become situated in space. While many places in the city keep evoking memories of the tsunami and of the time before the tsunami, rebuilding and remaking also necessarily mean forgetting – or a kind of remembering that not continuously 'reminds of'. It is in the interface with this kind of spatial forgetting that the tsunami monuments that I discuss in this chapter gain their symbolic power. I point out how they are political constructions that mask the forgetting of the conflict and channel tsunami memory into specific places in order to support a forward looking narrative of building a better future. Yet, the monuments are also affective sites ensuring future remembering of the past as long-lasting material mnemonics.

Chapter five addresses the way in which ideas about the future in Banda Aceh are intimately related to ideas about the past. People in Aceh often explained the tsunami in religious terms, as an act of God from which they should learn. The tsunami then became an opportunity for change, for improving oneself and society to become more Islamic in light of the end of the world which was made imminent by the tsunami. The tsunami was also seen as an opportunity for development, for moving towards modernity. There I also return to the argument of chapter one to show how expectations of and aspirations for the future were often expressed in terms of regaining Aceh's place in the world. Crucially, this chapter explores how these ideas about the future became part of different temporalities of Islam and modernity, and how these temporalities and aspirations were entangled in the remaking of the post-tsunami everyday.

Finally, in the conclusion, I return to the broader arguments outlined in this introduction. I bring together the different dimensions of post-tsunami remaking that I discuss in the separate chapters to support my suggestion of bringing in a focus on subjectivity, experience and 'remaking a world' as a fruitful way of understanding how people remake their lives in the wake of disaster.

To protect the anonymity of the people with whom I worked I have changed almost all personal names of non-public persons. For the same reason I do not name the neighborhoods in which I conducted my research, except for the relocation neighborhood, which would be quickly discernable because of its description here and elsewhere (Samuels 2012).