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

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## Chapter five

‘The sense of an ending’ and ‘building back better’: how different temporalities shape the present and the future in post-tsunami Aceh

*Why in Aceh? God has not yet given [the tsunami] to other people, He has given [it] to Aceh first, right? Perhaps it is also a test. Now people live again according to Shari‘a rules, perhaps it was a test. A warning, so that the Acehnese will be better people in the future. – Pak Jamaluddin, Banda Aceh, December 2007 –*

### Introduction

In the introduction of this dissertation I proposed that time is an actor in the process of remaking post-disaster everyday life in Aceh. In previous chapters we saw how time acts on the ways in which people experienced and remembered the tsunami. In chapter one I showed how many people in Aceh understood remaking global connections through the reconstruction process in a historical narrative of Acehnese identity. Chapter two explained how narrative experience brought together the narrated event and the narrative event in time and how subjunctivizing elements in narratives created uncertain futures. In chapter three we saw how the experience of time influenced the process of grieving – for example when people said that they felt like the tsunami happened yesterday or when they sensed that recovery was a step-by-step or day-by-day process. Chapter four addressed the way in which a discourse of focusing on the future requires different kinds of forgetting. This final chapter explores how ideas about the future influenced the post-tsunami context of remaking everyday life. As a starting point, it takes seriously Jane Guyer’s suggestion that “different temporal philosophies are ideologically marked and made culturally plausible and available” to explore how people use different temporalities to navigate through the post-disaster context (Guyer 2007: 411).

The text on a memorial plaque in the Aceh Thanks the World Park that I introduced in chapter one reads: “The sadness from the earthquake and tsunami did not come without blessing. The natural disaster brought people more conscious to the meaning of life, about their Creator, about peace and friendship, small gifts of life, and gratefulness [sic].” The message fits with the government’s progressive ‘building back better’ motto that we also saw earlier. Similar to the expression of gratitude expressed in the ‘Aceh thanks the world’ message (chapter one), the interpretation of the tsunami as a ‘blessing’ was not limited to the authorities, but resonated widely with the views of local tsunami survivors. Indeed, many people in Banda Aceh did speak of the tsunami as a starting point for a better future. The post-tsunami years in Banda Aceh were full of different ideas about improvement, as

many in Aceh's capital had the feeling that the tsunami had created the possibilities for building a better society. The two major normative frameworks for improvement were that of Islamic moral and religious improvement on the one hand and socio-economic development on the other hand. In this chapter I will show how aspirations for and expectations of these kinds of improvements were closely entangled in people's everyday lives in the years after the tsunami. Although based on different ideas of time, both improvement narratives gained momentum in relation to the tsunami, narrating the tsunami as a starting point or opportunity for change. Importantly, these improvement narratives emerged in a rapidly changing institutional context and in relation to state discourses on development and on the strengthening of Islamic law and institutions (Feener 2012, Feener forthcoming, Phelps et al. 2011). In this chapter I focus on the improvement narratives of tsunami survivors in Banda Aceh, showing how they were informed though never determined by state discourses, while building on different temporalities and aspirations. I suggest that the tsunami heightened the importance of certain temporal relations connecting the past, present, near and distant future, making the final 'end' imminent, but also opening up the possibility of near future improvement.

To analyze the improvement narratives of Islam and socio-economic development it is crucial to understand the ways in which people explained the tsunami in relation to the future social and personal changes that it brought about or should bring about. These future imaginaries were fundamentally influenced by two different views on time. An Islamic view on time, in which the world has a clear beginning and end, informed the idea that the tsunami was a sign that the end of the world was near. Interpreted as a God-given warning, test, or punishment, many Muslims explained the tsunami as a sign that they should improve their religiosity in the present to ensure a better position in the afterlife. The influential discourse on socio-economic development on the other hand, builds on a rather different view on time – one that is linear and promises never-ending progress. This idea of development has been promoted by the state since the colonial period, became the state philosophy during the New Order, and gained new momentum in Aceh after the tsunami (see Feener forthcoming). Interestingly, however, for many people in Aceh progress is not just a linear process but is also seen as a return to the past of a glorious, prosperous, and cosmopolitan 'Aceh'. As we saw in chapter one, the way in which Aceh suddenly came to the attention of the 'world' after the tsunami seemed to make this a real possibility. These different imaginaries of the future do not only coexist, but also come together in everyday life and through the tsunami explanations discussed in this chapter. It is by this particular focus on ideas about the future that I aim to emphasize how ideas about time and improvement not only developed in a specific historical context and gained momentum in the post-tsunami and post-conflict period, but also how, as temporal narratives that make specific sense of the disaster, they became an important part of the

remaking of the post-tsunami everyday. After a theoretical introduction on time and improvement, I will discuss tsunami explanations and ideas about the future, the Islamic notion of *hikmah* (wisdom) that brings together different ideas of improvement, and the role of the development discourse in the post-tsunami society.

### **Time and improvement**

The tsunami heightened the importance of two different views on time that became intimately related to ideas of improvement: a religious temporality through which the tsunami was explained as making people aware of the imminent end of the world and a development temporality through which the tsunami was seen as providing an opportunity to embark upon a linear process of progress. Most people in Aceh give religiously informed explanations for the tsunami (see Pak Jamaluddin, epigraph). In this repertoire of explanations, many Muslims saw the tsunami not only as a divine intervention, but also as an opportunity for themselves to become more pious and for the society as a whole for moral improvement. The need for piety is strongly anchored in the belief in the future end of the world. The way in which the future end inspires present actions is what Frank Kermode (1967) has called ‘the sense of an ending’. In this religious temporality, there is a beginning and an end. People now are ‘in the midst’ but the end will certainly come and the living can still change their fate. This ‘sense of an ending’ bestows meaning on the present in light of the expected future and influences present behavior (Kermode 1967: 17; see also Spyer 2000a). As Spyer (2000a: 177) concludes, “[i]n this way, social action becomes charged with a meaning and efficacy that ultimately derives from its relation to this end.”

The appeals of the distant future of the ‘end’ and the afterlife as well as the call for near future reform in this world are not new to Aceh. James Siegel has analyzed the focus on paradise and the afterlife in his discussion of the *Hikayat Prang Sabi* (‘Story of the Holy War’), the popular epic of war against the Dutch (Siegel 1979), and the change towards a focus on this-worldly reform after the 1930s (Siegel 2000 [1969]).<sup>167</sup> Like the war against the Dutch, the tsunami foregrounded the idea of the end of the world and therefore instilled the need for religious improvement with a particular sense of urgency.

Becoming more pious, however, is not the only form of improvement that is of concern to people in Aceh. As anthropologists of Islam have recently argued, in everyday life

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<sup>167</sup> Both Bowen (1997) and Siapno (2002) have remarked that in Siegel’s account the appeal of worldly reform movements was highly gendered. It was just men who superseded the village level and structures to connect to ‘the rope of God’. Siapno (2002) shows that at least during her research in the 1990s this was not the case (anymore). Many of the ideas about the tsunami and the future described in this chapter were voiced by men as well as women. My point is not to downplay gender differences in imaginings of the future, but to underscore that women as well as men create and recreate these broadly shared ideas about improvement and temporality.

different “moral registers” coexist or sometimes painfully contradict each other (Schielke 2009a; see also Marsden 2005, 2009, Schielke 2009b, Soares 2006; on Aceh see Kloos 2011), for example when Islamic ideals of chastity are confronted with expectations of romantic love, or when aspirations of consumption and well-being are confronted with religious disregard for attachment to worldly possessions (Schielke 2009b). “Morality in this sense,” Schielke argues, “is not only unsystematic and ambiguous, it is also accompanied by declaredly amoral aims and strategies that people deem necessary to fill the ‘emptiness’ of the everyday and to reach material well-being.” (2009a: S31). Others have analyzed this ambiguity in the context of *islam mondain*, emphasizing that religious values and ethical working on the self do not exclude worldly aspirations (Otayek and Soares 2007; see also Soares and Osella 2009: S11-S12).

Although these different kinds of aspirations do not necessarily come together without tensions, in this chapter I emphasize how they coexisted in Aceh’s post-tsunami everyday.<sup>168</sup> The moral and religious improvement that was deemed necessary in light of the coming end of the world by no means excluded people’s aspirations and expectations of more ‘worldly’ near future improvement. Aspirations for, especially, improvement of personal and collective material well-being and improvement of Aceh’s international position, its place-in-the-world (Ferguson 2006), were frequently voiced by people in Aceh. Different from the religious ‘sense of an ending’, these aspirations echo the development discourse that builds on a temporality of linear and never ending progress; a process for which the tsunami provided a beginning.

After the tsunami, many people expressed their hopes for improvement of the educational system and for more economic investments that would lead to more jobs and prosperity. They hoped that the international attention for Aceh that was generated by the tsunami would secure lasting international recognition that would attract tourists and economic investments and increase the possibilities for studying abroad. Young men and women in particular aspired to economic improvement that would enable them to pursue studies, start businesses and enjoy a middle class lifestyle that would include hanging out in Banda Aceh’s new hip road side cafés or the relatively expensive Pizza Hut, using internet on a smart phone and driving a car or a new motorcycle. As much as these aspirations may be inspired by images of middle class lifestyles circulating on television and in magazines, they were certainly also fuelled by the post-tsunami reconstruction industry that brought cafés, cars, and an air-conditioned shopping mall. The post-tsunami years increased rather than diminished the ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai 2004), an increased sense that

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<sup>168</sup> In public debate, different moral registers indeed may stand in a hierarchical relation. As Schielke (2009a: S32) remarks about Egypt: “While values can be debated, declaring them religious often ends the debate. All other moral registers have either to accept or ignore the supremacy of religion, but they cannot openly contest it.” However, in everyday life, people draw on different moral registers without reflecting on them all, or by painfully admitting that they cannot live up to the standards of perfect piety (Schielke 2009a, 2009b).

improvement towards the 'good life' was a real possibility.<sup>169</sup> Appadurai describes the capacity to aspire as enabling. I suggest that, created in the sphere of subjectivity, aspirations help people move through social life. Related to the capacity to aspire, the post-tsunami years also raised expectations of modernity (Ferguson 1999), which provided a strong and important imaginary of the future in post-tsunami Aceh. However, as Ferguson himself points out, when 'modernity' does not come as expected, or not for all, the unfulfilled promise of money and status may cause great frustration and disappointment (Ferguson 1999; see also Schielke 2009b).

The appeal of the development discourse of improvement towards modernity was not only part of a long tradition of 'development' in Indonesia, but was also informed by many changes in post-tsunami and post-conflict Aceh. The peace agreement, political change, the presence of hundreds of national and international NGOs and governmental agencies with their huge amounts of money and ambitious 'improvement schemes' (Li 2007), as well as the opening up of the province for travel contributed to the improvement momentum. Crucially, improvement – in the form of development – was promised by the national government and international organizations that frequently used the slogan of 'building back better'. 'Building back better' is an ongoing effort in the present without necessarily having a clear end point in the future and lacking a view of the past (see chapters one and four). 'Building back better' involved more than just socio-economic development. As Feener (forthcoming) points out, the Indonesian government promoted both a discourse of development and one of religious reform in Aceh after the tsunami. Religious improvement and socio-economic development thus not only come together in the everyday aspirations and expectations of tsunami survivors, but also in the governmental improvement effort. Different ideas about the future evolve in a field of differential power relations. The voices of religious leaders, the Indonesian government, international organizations and other powerful actors influence, but do not totally determine the everyday expectations and aspirations I analyze in this chapter. Rather, people position themselves in relation to different narratives and imaginaries. 'The will to improve' (Li 2007) was indeed the major drive for change in post-tsunami Aceh. However, this will was not only formulated by experts in 'improvement schemes', but also voiced and acted upon by many ordinary Acehnese. It is by studying this continuous process of positioning and

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<sup>169</sup> Appadurai (2004) calls the capacity to aspire a navigational capacity that is more developed for the rich than for the poor. In his 2004 book chapter, he discusses the capacity to aspire solely in the context of development, implicitly limiting 'aspirations' to those of material well-being and thus concluding that the rich have a higher capacity to aspire than the poor. Although I think that it would be interesting to broaden the analysis of 'aspirations to the good life' to, for example, aspirations of religious piety, I also find Appadurai's approach useful to focus on the particular connection between culture and development – which is the way in which I will use it in this chapter.

interaction that we can look beyond the state influence and find out how ordinary people create their worlds in interaction with powerful actors and others around them.

Importantly, the post-tsunami idea of development was not only grounded in a state-developmental discourse, but also in a historically based sense of Acehnese identity. As I pointed out in chapter one, present expectations of Acehnese modernity both inform and are informed by the imaginary of Aceh's glorious past; evoking a nostalgia for the Acehnese Golden Age in the pervasive aspiration to 're-connect' to globalization (see Ferguson 1999, 2008). It is not only the future of themselves and their families that people are concerned with, it is the future of 'Aceh' that matters when people discuss the future (whether in terms of religious behavior, God's love for the Acehnese, Aceh's relation to Indonesia, how Aceh is seen by 'the world', how Aceh can be a tourist attraction, how it can develop in terms of education and technology, etcetera). After the tsunami many people had the feeling that suddenly it had become possible not only to be part of the global Islamic *umma* and the globalized world, but to be part of modernity as Acehnese. Through different temporalities and contexts of the state development discourse, Islam, and Acehnese identity, people subjectively make sense of the past and the present by imagining the future. It is exactly in this subjective sphere that aspirations and expectations are created. This chapter will therefore again use the concept of subjectivity to explore how different "temporal philosophies" (Guyer 2007) are refracted in the lives of individuals who remake a post-tsunami world.

### **Religious improvement**

#### *God's will*

Many Acehnese Muslims considered the tsunami to be *takdir*; fate or destiny. This meant that for the people who lost their lives in the tsunami the predestined time of death (*ajal*) had already come, while for the survivors apparently it had not come yet (*belum ajal*). People often referred to *takdir* in conversations about acceptance and surrender (*pasrah*, see chapter three). A related expression that they frequently used was that the survivors had been given more time to live (*masih dikasih umur*). As the time of death is predetermined, it cannot be prevented.

The idea of a predestined future that is known by God but not by humans has a prominent presence in everyday life. Fate is called upon to explain bad things that happen (*musibah*, disasters) and good things that happen (*rezeki*, fortune), although both *musibah* and especially *rezeki*, which also has other, related, meanings, may also be the consequence of past actions. People in Aceh frequently use both *insy'Allah* (God willing) and *kalah umur panjang* (if [we] live long enough) when they talk about things that may happen in the future, indicating that people can never be sure that God wants it to happen that way. In short, since the notion of fate is deeply embedded in everyday life in Aceh, it is not



surprising that it became important in the context of explaining the tsunami as well.<sup>170</sup> For some people referring to *takdir* meant that they did not question the meaning of the tsunami any further, as further explanations of why God had sent the disaster were mere possibilities; no one would ever know for sure. However, this did not prevent a majority of the people I spoke with from raising one or more of these possible explanations and pointing at signs that provided extra ‘proof’ (*bukti*) that the tsunami had been God’s will.

Foretelling signs that predicted the tsunami included particular behavior of relatives who would die in the tsunami, dreams and visions, and stories about divine revelations or foretelling feelings. Like these revelatory signs, the tsunami itself was often interpreted as a sign of something to come, as will be discussed below.

Some people related how a pre-tsunami dream had been a sign of what was about to happen. In chapter three I wrote about Cut Marliani’s pre-tsunami dream of the sea rising in front of her. Ibu Rina, a young mother, who had lost many family members in the tsunami, also had a dream that she, afterwards, interpreted as a revelatory sign. She lived in one of Banda Aceh’s neighborhoods that had been seriously damaged, but after the tsunami she had, together with her husband, quickly renovated their damaged house. In front of the house they had made a small store in which she sold airtime for mobile phones and worked as a dressmaker. While sitting in her store and talking about memories of the tsunami on an afternoon in early 2008, she told me about the dream she had on the night before the disaster<sup>171</sup>:

In this dream my mother and my younger sister came to me. My sister said: ‘sister, please forgive me.’ That was in my dream. ‘Why do you ask for forgiveness? What have you done wrong?’ [I asked.] I felt that my mother was there. And then my mother said: ‘just forgive.’ Alright, I forgive. But the following morning the tsunami came. They disappeared.

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<sup>170</sup> For the Acehnese I spoke with, the emphasis on fate did not mean that in case of a calamity one could go sit and wait for death to come. Rather, as many people said, one should work to take care of oneself and others (*berusaha*). For example, in case of severe illness one should get medical assistance instead of letting the disease progress unhindered. The leading Acehnese newspaper Serambi Indonesia has several times published articles that argue for a proactive attitude in disaster mitigation in contrast to passively accepting fate (see for example ‘Mencermati Ancaman dan Kerentanan Bencana’, 6 December 2005; ‘Lima Tahun Tsunami: Momen Mengintrospeksi’, 26 December 2009; ‘Pola Pikir Menghadapi Bencana Alam’, 11 November 2010). In this context the secular word for disaster, *bencana*, is almost always preferred over the religious *musibah*.

<sup>171</sup> Siegel (2000: 326-329) mentions three categories of dreams in Aceh, of which only one, *loempòë*, is ‘true’: “It is true, however, because it contains a message. It is a sign of what will happen. Moreover, it is sent not by djinns but by God.” (*op. cit.*: 328). Grayman et al. (2009) also encounter this category of dreams and add that people rarely discuss these dreams. On the history of visionary dreams in Islam see Green (2003).

Only after the tsunami, did Rina realize that this dream had announced their parting.<sup>172</sup> Other people spoke of strange behavior on the part of their relatives that had been a sign of their coming death or related how in retrospect their relatives had sensed that they would die. One of the persons who told me such a story was Pak Nazaruddin. Before the tsunami, he had been a businessman in Jakarta, where he lived with his wife and children (see chapter three). His parents, who both died in the tsunami, had lived in their village of origin, a fishermen's neighborhood in Banda Aceh in which his father had been a religious leader. Soon after the tsunami Pak Nazaruddin moved back to Aceh permanently to start his own shop in his old neighborhood. In one of our conversations in his shop, he told me how perhaps his father had sensed his own death: "One month before the tsunami he called me [in Jakarta]. He asked all of us to come home; as if he already knew he would die." Pak Nazaruddin explained how his family in Aceh started to send all kinds of special Acehnese food to Jakarta and went on saying: "So I called him; and he asked to take the children home to Aceh. He meant that I should take them home to Aceh because, how did he say it, he said: perhaps I will die and then I won't see them again."<sup>173</sup>

One most visible sign that has been so often referred to as an indication that the tsunami was given by God, was the image of mosques still standing in a landscape in which everything had been washed away. The pictures of the lonely mosques are moving, striking, and extremely powerful. They highlight the emptiness surrounding them, and for most Acehnese they are moving because they show God's power; while destroying everything, He left the mosques standing. The images of the mosques are not the only pictures that are thought of as making visible the divine cause of the tsunami. In an aerial picture of the tsunami waves for the coast of Sri Lanka that was posted on numerous internet sites, many people saw the name of God in Arabic script. This appearance was perhaps not only powerful as a divine message, but also through the sacredness of the written name of God (cf. George 2010, Starrett 1995).

Apart from such lasting visible images, many circulating miracle stories underscored the divine origin of the event. Some were very personal. A teenager I came to know well had become stuck in a net of barbed wire deep down in the water. He prayed and prayed that if the time of his death had come (*ajal*) God would make death come quickly, but that if he still had time to live, the wire would come loose. Immediately after his prayer, he could free himself. Others told me how they felt that they were picked up by a snake under water and lifted up to the surface or how they had seen that a sudden ray of light lifted

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<sup>172</sup> At the end of Ramadan, *Idul Fitri*, Muslims ask each other for forgiveness, thereby settling any (unconscious) faults of the past to continue relationships with a clean slate. That Rina's sister asked for forgiveness in the dream may mean that she wanted to close off their past peacefully before her death.

<sup>173</sup> As others in Aceh told me, it is common that people sense their death forty days in advance. They sense it without being fully aware of it, so they may give signs or say goodbye without being aware that they are doing so.

people to the top of a mosque. Other stories tell about holy places that were spared by the water or how people were saved after they promised to fast for a certain number of days.

Not only Muslims explained the tsunami in religious ways. In fact, the Buddhist and Christian residents of Banda Aceh whom I interviewed often drew on similar religious explanations and interpretations, for example those of accepting one's fate and understanding the disaster as a divine intervention. One Buddhist Chinese-Indonesian woman, Ibu Milly, told me about the divine signs she experienced during the tsunami. The first sign was perceived by her twelve year old niece who had the gift of being able to contact spirits. The family, who lived in the city center of Banda Aceh, had climbed up to the roof where they were holding each other and praying together. Suddenly, her niece came to Milly and said that she had seen three Buddhist princes talking to each other. They were discussing something, but she could not hear what they were saying. Another sign was perceived by Milly's younger sister, who at a certain moment went downstairs to see if she could save the mobile phone that had been left near the Buddhist altar in their living room. When she wanted to take it, suddenly two snakes stood up at both sides of the altar. She asked them to go away so that she could take the mobile phone, which they did. Milly said that it was almost certain that the snakes were their ancestors who apparently were watching over them.

Once she had started telling these stories, Milly, and one of her friends who was joining our conversation, came up with many more. They told me how people had seen the divine light that lifted others up to the top of the Great Mosque, both Muslims and Chinese-Indonesians (most of whom are Buddhists or Christians). And how a friend had been looking desperately for the key to get out of her house while the water was rising. Suddenly, a God (*dewa*) had shed light on the key that was in the water. Another friend was drowning in the water with a younger brother. They were under water and could not get up to the surface. They prayed and prayed and prayed and suddenly they felt a wooden board under their feet that lifted them up to the surface. Now they are most convinced of their faith and they are extremely diligent in their worship and prayers.

The pre-tsunami signs that predicted the disaster build on the notion of predestination. Some people sensed that their own death was coming and although people with *ilmu* (special knowledge) warned for the disaster, most ordinary people only recognized the signs afterwards. As some people explained to me, God does give signs and warnings, but they are implicit; in dreams, in children's behavior. Apart from confirming that the disaster and death were fated, these signs as well as the miracles that happened during the tsunami emphasized that the tsunami as well as the fate of individuals were part of a divine plan. These stories showed that God planned to save certain people and places. In many respects they are connected to a broader repertoire of tsunami explanations – and their consequences for present and future behavior.

### *Tsunami explanations*

Most people told me that the heavy earthquake in the Indian Ocean had caused the tsunami, but the deeper explanation of why this had happened to Aceh (or to a person in particular) was almost always framed in religious terms.<sup>174</sup> The tsunami was then alternately explained as a test, a warning, or a punishment.<sup>175</sup> These explanations often overlapped and many people mentioned several explanations simultaneously. Therefore, rather than describing them as mutually exclusive options, they can be seen as part of a dynamic religious repertoire. In this section, I explore some of the explanations within this repertoire that have important consequences for ideas about the present and the future.

The tsunami was often explained as a test or trial (*cobaan*). God had given the people of Aceh (as a group or as individuals) a difficult trial through which they could show the strength of their faith (*iman*).<sup>176</sup> In addition, by overcoming the disaster, they would strengthen their faith even more. Some people emphasized that the tsunami was thus given to the Acehnese people because God loved them and therefore had given them the chance to pass this test. Ibu Wira, who lost her daughter in the tsunami, and whom we met in chapters two and three, said that she dealt with the process of grieving as one of individual *introspeksi*, saying that the tsunami had been a test that offered her the opportunity to move up a grade (*naik kelas*) or, in other words, to increase her religious knowledge. Her learning and praying were therefore not only a crucial way to deal with her grief, but also a conscious effort of personal ethical improvement (cf. Kloos 2011), resulting from the interpretation of the tsunami as a test. While for Ibu Wira this was an individual process, the tsunami was also often thought of as giving the Acehnese as a group the opportunity to become more pious.

In other instances, people explained the tsunami as a direct consequence of the conflict in Aceh. They would say, for example, that the disaster was God's way to 'wipe Aceh clean' (sometimes the English word *cleaning* was used), because of the chaos (*kekacauan*). Chaos in this context referred to the conflict that had troubled the province for decades and in the last years, before the August 2005 peace agreement, had heavily impacted on daily life in Banda Aceh. Many of Banda Aceh's residents saw peace as a direct consequence of the

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<sup>174</sup> This line of reasoning is also used by Islamic scholars and religious teachers. For example in a book called 'Tsunami, tanda kekuasaan Allah' (Tsunami, a sign of God's power) Dr. Abdurrahman al Baghdady explains that the statement that earthquakes and tsunamis are just natural phenomena is wrong. He argues that they are indeed natural phenomena but God decides when they occur (Abdurrahman al Baghdady 2005: 64-72). For a more elaborate overview of theological perspectives on the tsunami in books, articles, and online publications, see Idria (2010).

<sup>175</sup> For other overviews of different explanations see Idria (2010), Fanany (2010) and Feener (forthcoming). Wieringa (2011) analyzes the how religious interpretations of the tsunami are reflected in tsunami poetry.

<sup>176</sup> Although often translated as 'faith', Talal Asad argues that *iman* would be better translated as the virtue of faithfulness toward God (Asad 2003: 90). It would then be this virtue that people could cultivate by overcoming the disaster.

disaster – and the tsunami thus as God’s way to enforce peace. Such was the view of Ahmad, the young broker whom we met in chapter one as a barrack coordinator and construction supervisor. His words reinforce not only the perceived relation between the conflict and the tsunami, but also the understanding of the tsunami as a radical break with the past providing a new beginning:

According to us [the tsunami] is a warning. Perhaps here everything had gone too far already. First, if we look at it from this perspective, there was the conflict. There were murders; houses were burned down, those kinds of things. Chaos (*kekacauan*); let it be over at once. Like that. God gave [it]: everything was over. *Cleaning. Clear* [English], clean, cleaned up. To begin a new life. That is it, according to my personal opinion.

One explanation for the tsunami was therefore that God was angry because of the violence in Aceh. But according to many, God was also angry because of the profusion of sinful behavior and moral degradation. ‘Sin’ in this context was sometimes referred to as *dosa*, the general Indonesian term for sin, but more often as *maksiat*, which is generally used in the meaning of sexual immorality. As women are often bestowed with the burden of guarding sexual morality, *maksiat* is a gendered concept.<sup>177</sup> This attention to moral degradation and sexual immorality may have caused the post-tsunami increase in moral vigilantism and attention to women’s dress and moral behavior.<sup>178</sup> Michelle Miller (2010) points out how some religious leaders argued that the tsunami was caused by women’s immoral conduct. However, though often referring to *maksiat* as a plausible cause, the Acehnese people I spoke with rarely explicitly blamed women as a group for causing the tsunami. Nevertheless, this narrative of the tsunami as a punishment for committed sins feeds into the ongoing moral lectures of religious leaders that focus on the future in order to change the present – and the present in order to change the future (see below).<sup>179</sup> In this respect one particular tsunami explanation kept returning. According to this explanation, on the evening before the tsunami (Christmas, 25<sup>th</sup> of December) people were having a party near the grave of *Teungku Syiah Kuala* (*Syeikh Abdurrauf Singkil*, see chapter four). According to many, the people partying near the grave that night were Indonesian military; non-Acehnese. They drank lots of alcohol and ‘played with women’ (*main perempuan*), sins

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<sup>177</sup> I thank David Kloos for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>178</sup> See Newman (2009) on the rise of vigilantism with regard to supposed moral transgressions in Aceh.

<sup>179</sup> Miller’s broader argument is that because people saw the disaster as divine punishment for their sins, feelings of guilt made them accept the strict Shari’a rules rather easily. Although divine punishment is one important explanation, I think we should be cautious in depicting guilt as the pervasive feeling. Arguably, while divine punishment is the explanation most often adopted by religious leaders, interpreting the tsunami as a warning or a test given because God loves the Acehnese is of similar importance in society at large. Concomitantly, guilt may have been only one among a range of sentiments of which in the long term, for example, that of acceptance seemed to be much more important.

according to Islam. The guard of the grave warned them that they should stop the party, but they did not, which aroused the wrath of God. The next day the tsunami struck Aceh as a direct punishment for what happened.

Several things stand out in this story that has a very broad circulation. First of all, even though people often mention that the partygoers were ‘playing with women’, the emphasis is clearly on men as the wrongdoers who would not listen to the guard and aroused God’s anger. Secondly, many people described the men on the beach as military men. Because of this, the story of what happened near *Syiah Kuala*’s grave connects the narratives of immorality and of chaos because of the conflict as explanations for God’s decision to send the tsunami. Importantly, it was often mentioned that the soldiers were non-Acehnese, which fits into a more general narrative of outsiders causing problems in Aceh (see for example chapter two). This explanation therefore seems to be also politically framed.

Finally, in this story, apparently a very small group of wrongdoers caused the deaths of more than 130,000 people. Interestingly, across the whole repertoire of tsunami explanations, individual and collective responsibilities are alternately invoked without excluding each other. While Ibu Wira saw the tsunami as something she could personally learn from, in other narratives the disaster was a collective test given to the Acehnese, or a sign for the whole Islamic *umma* that the end of the world is near (see below). Further, individual deaths were explained both on collective and individual levels. One explanation that was often offered was that for each sinful person ten others had to be taken as well; an explanation that not only provides a religious interpretation but also emphasizes the uncountability of the dead. An explanation for the death of loved ones, especially children, was also that God had chosen those whom he loved most. In this context one woman emphasized that not the people who survived, but those who were in heaven with God now were saved (*selamat*).<sup>180</sup>

One recurrent tsunami explanation with profound implications for present behavior was that the tsunami was a warning or reminder (*peringatan*). God sent the tsunami to remind the Acehnese that the Day of Judgment, on which they will be confronted with their sins, was near. However, the survivors still had some time to change; to improve their conduct and become good Muslims. In informal conversations about the tsunami religious explanations as well as the hope for a better future were frequently brought up and most of the people whom I quote in this chapter talked elaborately about these topics in the private conversations that we had. These topics were also frequently discussed in more public settings. The next section starts with a passage from my field notes in which I describe how a religious teacher explains the tsunami as a sign that the Day of Judgment is near and urges his audience to become more pious.

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<sup>180</sup> She deliberately played with the word *selamat* here, as it can both mean that someone survived (the disaster) and that someone was ‘saved’ (and in heaven now).

*The Day of Judgment: fear, hope and the opportunity for improvement*

On a Saturday afternoon in May 2009 I join the monthly neighborhood *arisan* (women's gathering, rotating savings club). The hostess has invited a religious teacher (*ustadz*) to give a lecture. After a long prayer *ustadz* Ibrahim begins to talk about the tsunami, stating that in spite of the tsunami there are still many people who are committing sins. We should be aware that our soul (*rohani*) and our heart are important, not our material possessions (*harta*). He goes on to explain that the tsunami is already announced in the Qur'an. What is also announced is that there will be signs that the end of the world is drawing near. Nowadays there are more and more disasters, the teacher explains; even today there has been a disaster in Nigeria. The world is old, seven thousand years old, and we only have some centuries left. But actually, we do not know this and the Day of Judgment may even be tomorrow. The tsunami came because of the multiplicity of sins committed in Aceh. It is not because God does not love us. He does love us, but the tsunami was a warning. And actually this warning did not (yet) amount to anything; it lasted only ten minutes.

The *ustadz* then tells the story of the prophet Musa and the seven plagues in Egypt to explain how God sends tests and warnings and to conclude that those trials were much heavier than the ten minutes of the tsunami. He finishes his lecture by saying that people have to pay attention to God's signs. When the world ends, everything you have done will be revealed. And then you will regret that you did not give money to orphans. We should not care for money, because we cannot take money with us to the grave. (*Fieldnotes, May 2009*)

*Ustadz* Ibrahim was studying abroad during the disaster and lost most of his family in Aceh. He explains the disaster as a warning, drawing on texts from the Qur'an. The warning is directly related to the future end of the world: one's moral behavior now will influence one's position at the Day of Judgment. His use of the disaster to warn his listeners for committing sins echoes the many lectures and teachings of religious leaders emphasizing that with the tsunami God punished the Acehnese for their sins. As can be understood from *ustadz* Ibrahim's lecture, this explanation not only installs guilt. It also explicitly leaves room for hope. God gave the tsunami because He loves the Acehnese; He warns them, because He wants to save them. The apocalyptic message of the approach of the Day of Judgment may instill fear, but at the same time it opens up an opportunity. If only people learn from this disaster and become good Muslims, God may have mercy.

It is in this context that survivors like Ibu Wira, who was also present at the *arisan*, saw the disaster as an opportunity, as something from which they could learn. Another woman from her neighborhood who interpreted the tsunami as an opportunity to become more pious was Ibu Agustina, who was married, had three school-going children and came from

an upper middle class family. After the tsunami she had been hesitant about returning to the totally destroyed neighborhood, but when she saw that the house was reconstructed she slowly started to feel like moving back. While sitting comfortably together in her big, totally reconstructed house, Ibu Agustina told me elaborately about her interpretation of the tsunami as God's will. She emphasized that many of the things she owned now were bigger and more beautiful than the ones she had owned before the tsunami. On the other hand she argued that after the tsunami she cared less about beautiful things; it was mostly others such as her husband who chose them. But she was happy to accept this as God's will as well, as fortune (*rezeki*).

When the tsunami hit, Ibu Agustina was visiting family in an inner city neighborhood. She was taken by the water but managed to save herself and her daughter who was with her by climbing on a house. Like many others, at that time she thought that the end of the world had come (*kiamat*)<sup>181</sup>:

At the time of the tsunami, Anne, when I was safe from the water, there was only one thing on my mind: according to our religion, if we die we take our sins (*dosa*) and our merits (*pahala*) with us. The question is of which there is more, the merits or the sins. So what was on my mind was that I did not bring anything! I have many sins, but no merits. My worshipping was still irregular (*bolong bolong*, litt. 'with holes in it'), I had made many promises, my clothes were wrong, too tight.

She went on to tell me how she changed this after the tsunami. She changed her clothing and prayers, but also her attitude towards other people. Now, she often felt like giving things to others and so she gave money to orphans, saying: "I am afraid that when I die my merits will be too few; that it won't be enough." However, she also said that those who did die during the tsunami will be in heaven:

We, as Muslims, think that the people who died during the tsunami will in the afterlife (*akhirat*) have a position in heaven. They died as martyrs (*mati syahid*). People cry for them, but actually we should cry for ourselves who are still here. They will be in heaven, but for us it is yet uncertain. We should just surrender (*pasrah*).

Schielke (2009b) has argued that we should not only pay attention to people's ideals of pious behavior, but also to the outcomes, the failures and tensions these ideals may cause. Ibu Agustina seemed to feel uneasy about living in a beautiful house with a huge television and a refrigerator that was much bigger and more beautiful than the one she owned before

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<sup>181</sup> *Kiamat* (A. *Kiyāma*) is in Islam the Resurrection that follows the annihilation of the world and precedes the Judgment (Gardet 2012).



the disaster, as this seemed to contrast with the pious position of not valuing material possessions. Although people do not necessarily have solutions in case of moral dilemmas (*ibid.*), in this case she does propose a solution by using the notion of *rezeki* to explain that this luxury was not her own wish. It is in this way that she positioned herself in relation to normative religious ideas about material possessions.

Although many people said that the tsunami was meant to improve moral behavior, they also complained about the lack of moral improvement in present society. Many Acehnese told me that apparently people were ‘still not aware’, referring to shops staying open during the evening prayer (*maghrib*), young people going out late at night, and the moral danger of the internet. On the other hand many of the same people complained about the lack of entertainment in Banda Aceh. Pious behavior is then, as anthropologists of Islam have remarked (Marsden 2005, 2009; Schielke 2009a, 2009b), not the only moral framework or aim in people’s everyday lives. Nevertheless, the enormous attention to the relation between the tsunami and personal as well as collective moral change influenced at least some people’s actual behavior, as well as post-tsunami religious institutional reform (Feener forthcoming, Lindsey and Hooker 2007, Miller 2010).

#### *Forebodings of the final end*

Returning then to the tsunami explanations in Aceh, the sense of a final end makes both the tsunami (as a warning, punishment, or test) and present actions meaningful. Present social actions are influenced by the expectation of an end, because by their present conduct people can influence their *personal* end (on the Day of Judgment). This is exactly what Ibu Agustina aimed to establish by changing her behavior. The sense of an ending thus establishes a relation between the individual and his or her position in the end, after death and on the Day of Judgment. If the tsunami is interpreted as an immediate consequence of past sinning, however, present *collective* conduct can also influence the (near) future of Aceh. This is the immediate conclusion from a warning that was painted in graffiti on some unused roadblocks (see pictures 11 and 12). The text says: ‘awas maksiat, stunami [*sic*] dekat, mari kita berdoa’, which can be translated as ‘beware of sins, the tsunami is near, let us pray’. The assumption is clear: if people commit sins (again), another tsunami will come soon. The numbers in red are counting down: 3-2-1. Although it is not sure that the numbers are connected to the message, if they are their meaning seems obvious. Thus, present actions influence both the near and the ultimate future.

Like *ustadz* Ibrahim, Ibu Agustina told me that the tsunami, together with other disasters in Indonesia, was a sign that the end of the world was near. As noted above, to many people the tsunami itself seemed to be the end of the world and only when it was over they realized it was not. In the apocalypse there can be different ‘ends’ (Kermode 1967: 89). Next to the final end of the world (that stops time) there are the great crises in human

life that do not stop time (*ibid.*). They seem to be the apocalypse, “but the world goes forward in the hands of the exhausted survivors” (*op. cit.* 82). In Aceh, the great crisis of the tsunami made the final end (*kiamat*) immanent and imminent (Kermode 1967). Although the apocalyptic idea is nothing new, it is through the framework of crisis of the tsunami that it becomes imminent, close and immediately relevant to the present – time is running out for changing one’s behavior. Moreover, frequent crises in Indonesia and abroad are interpreted as a sign that the Day of Judgment is near. While many people recognized the dreams and other signs that had predicted the tsunami only after the disaster, they also interpreted the tsunami itself as a sign of the final end that gives meaning to the present. The tsunami therefore made the religious temporality of an end time more present, thereby increasing the need for present and future religious improvement.

Although the end cannot be evaded, there may be hope. As we have seen above, many people interpreted the tsunami as a test (*tes, cobaan*). The tsunami made many victims for whom the disaster was the personal end. But the survivors lived through this ‘end’ and people like Ibu Wira and Ibu Agustina saw this as an explicit personal opportunity to be a morally good person and accumulate their religious rewards (*pahala*). They interpreted their survival as a personal second chance. Moreover, living through the tsunami and its aftermath made them, as many others said as well, more aware (*sadar*) of their religious duties. Without denying that these narratives may instill guilt and fear, I would say that at the same time they are for many people ways to come to terms with the terrible disaster that happened to them in a way that relates to their most profound beliefs. As I emphasized above, different explanations of the tsunami as a test, a warning, or punishment are not mutually exclusive. Neither are the feelings of guilt, submission, acceptance, devotion, and becoming aware of religious duties. They are all ways of making sense of what Kermode calls being in the ‘middest’.

### **Hikmah**

As we have seen above, the interpretation of the tsunami as given by God as part of a divine plan and as foreshadowing the end of the world, urged for people’s moral improvement in the present. But many people related the certainty that the tsunami was God’s will also to other kinds of post-tsunami improvements, such as the peace agreement and increased social and economic well-being. Rather than something people were urged to work upon, these improvements were seen as almost a direct effect of the tsunami. The way in which these different kinds of improvement were entangled and related to the interpretation of the tsunami as part of a divine plan is clearly seen in how people used the Islamic concept of *hikmah* (divine wisdom).

The concept of *hikmah*, often translated as ‘wisdom’ but also related to ‘truth’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘perfection’, has been mostly elaborated in Sufi philosophy. Throughout

Islamic history it has also been identified with intellectual sciences in general (Nasr 2006: 37). Since the early period of Islam it has had a wide range of connotations and there is no single fixed meaning of the concept throughout the Qur'an (Yaman 2011: 1-4). Hikmet Yaman shows how according to early Muslim commentators "there is a causal relationship between sincere piety and being given hikmah..." (2011: 3) and that according to the Qur'an "God is the ultimate possessor of hikmah." (*ibid.*). The concept can be understood very broadly as "all knowledge within the reach of man" (Goichon 2012), in which, for early Muslim mystics, "real knowledge of everything, including hikmah, is not a matter of rational "knowing," but existential "being": hikmah is a process of knowing." (Yaman 2011: 270). Nasr describes how for many early Islamic philosophers *hikmah* meant both knowledge and the way it is practiced (Nasr 2006: 36-38). It is this close relation between knowledge and action that is echoed in Acehnese descriptions of *hikmah* in the tsunami as both God's wisdom and the positive effects of this divine intervention in the world.

The idea that there was divine wisdom in the tsunami (*'tsunami ada hikmah'*) usually came up in conversations about material and social improvement; when discussing things that got better after the tsunami. By evoking the concept of *hikmah* people suggested that the tsunami was part of God's plan to do something good for them, to bring improvement – ranging from a religious lesson or warning to improvement of the political and economic situation.

When Pak Nazaruddin, the shop owner, and I talked in his shop about the meaning of the tsunami, he formulated two forms of tsunami *hikmah*:

If God gives us a test, in the end there will be *hikmah* in it. (...) After what happened here, with people losing their parents and others, the Acehnese could have had *stres* now. But because they have a strong religion, a strong faith, they would think 'this test will have *hikmah*'. What that *hikmah* is? Well, for example. That young man, Tarmizi, did not have a house before the tsunami. Now he owns a house. That is *hikmah*. And then there is the second *hikmah*. Before the tsunami, there was an ongoing conflict in Aceh. That ended because of the tsunami.

While the idea of the tsunami as a test through which the Acehnese should strengthen their faith was pervasive in what Pak Nazaruddin told me, his idea of *hikmah* was rather related to livelihood improvement. Importantly, both Pak Nazaruddin and I knew that the young man, Tarmizi (see below), had lost many family members during the tsunami and had great difficulties to make ends meet financially. By explaining the concept of *hikmah*, then, Pak Nazaruddin did obviously not mean that the tsunami had been only good for them. Rather, it meant that the disaster was part of a divine plan and that in the long term it was

meant to improve certain things. According to Pak Nazaruddin, it was this realization that kept people from going mad.<sup>182</sup>

In Pak Nazaruddin's explanation *hikmah* is both per definition part of the test that God gave the people and can be seen in the effects of this test (such as better houses and a peace agreement). Others also spoke of *hikmah* as something people received (*dapat*) through the tsunami. As indicated above, this could mean material improvement in the form of houses and objects, the peace agreement, or for example the post-tsunami international attention. However, in other contexts *hikmah* could also refer to the religious lesson people learned from the tsunami, often in relation to its interpretation of being a test or a warning as discussed above. In these uses of the concept of *hikmah* as divine wisdom and its practice or effects in the world, different notions of present and future improvement are entangled in the idea of the tsunami as given by God from His wisdom. I suggest that the widespread use of the concept of *hikmah* to describe the tsunami brings together moral lessons and everyday living conditions in one notion of improvement. The tsunami as *hikmah*, as divine wisdom or insight, means that the disaster shows God's influence in near future improvement, while at the same time being part of His all-encompassing temporal plan.

### **Socio-economic development**

As captured in the different uses of the notion of *hikmah*, aspirations for change included many different ideas of improvement. Schielke (2009b: 172) argues that "(...) the development of global capitalism, corresponding practices of production and consumption and the aspirations of progress and a better life have become a fundamental constituent of people's expectations and experiences even in the most remote places (...)." He notices that "consumption and moral practice have become intertwined in a complex way as key modalities of aspiring to and realizing happiness (...)." (*ibid.*). Thus, although we often tend to think of consumption as morally suspect – as, for example, Ibu Agustina seemed to do as well in the conversation that I quoted above – morality and consumption are often intertwined. Similarly, aspirations for both religious and material improvement were very influential in post-tsunami and post-conflict Aceh. Both were created and expressed by many institutions (such as the national government, international organizations, religious institutions, and NGOs) as well as by ordinary Acehnese. Especially young people aspired to earn money and live a middle class lifestyle, but both younger and older people often spoke about their hopes for Aceh as a nation to become more prosperous. Economic prosperity, in this often sketched image of the future, would be paired with a strong Islamic identity. It was in this context that many people brought up the image of Aceh's glorious

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<sup>182</sup> This remark of Pak Nazaruddin represents a more general idea that people did not go mad because of their faith (see chapter three). Interestingly, it speaks not only to the pious self-identification of many people in Aceh, but also to the magnitude of the grief – without faith, going mad would be a real possibility.

past (see chapter one), in which the region was at once Islamic, prosperous, and cosmopolitan. Before taking a look at the ideas about development and the future of Aceh of one Acehnese man, Tarmizi, let me briefly discuss the influential institutional promotion of the development discourse and ask how and where the state's discourse on the future meets with ordinary people's expectations.

### *Building back better*

BRR (the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency, see chapter one) and many of its reconstruction partners (NGOs and other international aid agencies) from 2005 onwards started to use the slogan "building back better" to support a progressive message: Aceh would not only be reconstructed, but even made much better than it used to be. The joint report of BRR and a number of its partners that came out one year after the disaster is titled: "Aceh and Nias one year after the tsunami: the recovery effort and way forward". The one year report of BRR (April 2006) is called: "Building a land of hope". And the title of the first of a series of books published at the end of BRR's term is: "Tsunami: from disaster to the emergence of light." (Hanief Arie 2009). In the pictures in the first two reports children are playing and smiling and the Acehnese are working hard to rebuild their houses. The latter book indeed ends with a picture of the sun shining on an Acehnese mountain. In the public statements of many humanitarian agencies and BRR the focus is strongly on reconstruction and the bright future that lies ahead. Few references are made to the death and grief of the tsunami or the conflict. Often, the tsunami is even described as an opportunity, as the starting point for this better future (see chapter four).

The optimistic message that was so often voiced by the reconstruction agency and its partners of course relates to their own task of rebuilding. It is a political message of a government that was unpopular during the years of conflict (and still much criticized during the reconstruction process). It is the message of a government that has everything to win by focusing on the future; a bright future that in fact seemed to be beyond the official term of BRR (that ended in April 2009) and the reconstruction projects of most international agencies. Moreover, as Anderson (1998) shows, the image of going from darkness to light as a message of social and political transition has a long history in Indonesian nationalism.<sup>183</sup>

The 'building back better' narrative leaves little room for discussing failures of the past, remembering the conflict and mourning the tsunami dead. The progressive focus on rebuilding towards the future and 'the way forward' also leaves little room for discussing stumbling blocks on the 'way' and other pressing issues (such as rebuilding the local government, politics and corruption affairs). The continuous use of phrases such as 'building back better', 'the way forward' and Aceh being in 'transition' evoked the idea of a

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<sup>183</sup> See Siegel (2000 [1969]: 122) on the idea of Islam as 'light' after darkness in Aceh.

'better future' (see also Feener forthcoming). However, the agencies that took responsibility for the reconstruction process would only stay for a short while and would certainly be gone once that future would arrive. The narrative is thus one of continuous progress without an ending – although projects through which progress should materialize had clear end points. The 'trustees' (Li 2007) who had taken on the task of improvement had been doing this in a particular temporal framework. Not actual improvement, the arrival of a 'better' future, or the possibly prolonged 'need' for improvement were reasons for deciding to leave or stay and go on with the process. Rather, their temporal mandates had been predetermined; their task of building back better only lasted so long. Taking my cue from the impressive work of Tania Li (2007) I am not suggesting that the will to improve of the people working as 'experts' in reconstruction was not genuine. However, the 'building back better' kind of improvement of the trustees in national government and international agencies was caught in a different time span than the ideas of improvement of people living in Aceh. While for the former, the future was bound to the determined time span of the project, after which new projects in different places would follow, for the latter the future could be a broad combination of near and distant futures as I described above. There is clearly a power difference between the experts or trustees and the 'ordinary Acehnese' whose lives had to be 'reconstructed'. Apart from the differences in political and material resources, I suggest that the power difference is also apparent in the possibility of envisioning futures. Appadurai (2004) argues that the rich have more capacity to aspire than the poor. However, in this case the power difference in aspiration is rather one between what Li (2007) calls 'trustees' and the people whose lives have to be improved. The trustees could almost unlimitedly refer to the better future. BRR and the international aid agencies would leave after a predetermined period, without having to live in and account for the 'better' society they promised to build. For the people living in that society, however, a possible failure of the expectations to materialize could have a huge impact (Ferguson 1999).

Importantly, then, different voices with different visions of improvement come with different interests. These voices are not equal in terms of power relations. Yet while Indonesian government officials may have endorsed certain improvement ideas because of particular political interests, these ideas could also gain purchase within a more general societal momentum of expectation of improvement. Rather than being a one-way process of powerful institutions developing and disseminating improvement narratives that are in their own interest to an ignorant population, these narratives develop and intersect in a complex field of social relations that developed in Aceh over time. While state actors develop and spread their ideas about the future, they cannot prescribe how people imagine their future and interpret the present. It is precisely by looking at the ways in which ordinary people appropriate and adapt official discourses and create ideas about the

present and the future that are grounded in their everyday lives that we can grasp not only the limits of the state, but also the possibilities and imaginings that emerge outside those limits.

Before moving to Tarmizi's story, which explicitly reflects certain expectations of modernity, let me stress one last point. Whereas many people and organizations formulate ideas on general improvement, in everyday life people are concerned with improving their own lives and futures. It is mostly the near future that matters in everyday life (Guyer 2007). Thus, people may be concerned with gathering enough money to buy new clothes for their children for the *Idul Fitri* festivities, or with the wedding of one of their children, exams, or paying the monthly rent. In contrast to the punctuated time and dates of the near future, the capacity to aspire is an ongoing process in the present (Appadurai 2004). Rather than contradicting collective future visions like 'improvement of the educational system' or the presence of the distant future end in 'everyday millenarianism' (Robbins 2001), in everyday life – the ongoing present – these different futures go together and do not necessarily compete with each other.

### *Modernity*

In April 2009 BRR's term officially ended and the assets as well as the leftover problems<sup>184</sup> were handed over to a short-term transitional agency (BKRA) and the provincial government. Many international humanitarian agencies and donors had left already and others were busy finishing and evaluating their projects. Only a few of them pledged to stay after 2009. In the same month legislative elections would be held and for the first time local political parties were allowed to participate.<sup>185</sup> The province had entered another period of 'transition' facing substantial political and administrative changes. It was at this time that I met Tarmizi, whom I introduced in chapter one in the discussion of the *proposal*. Like so many others, he was worried about the economic situation. Also, many people were concerned with the peace process; not only in light of the upcoming elections, but also because many international organizations were leaving. People felt that their presence, even if it was for tsunami reconstruction projects, had contributed to political stability. Now that the attention of 'the world' moved to other regions and countries, uncertainty increased. Concerning the future, many people said that they hoped it would be 'better' (*lebih baik*), for Aceh and for themselves. Tarmizi's ideas resonate with the imaginaries of the future I heard from many people in Banda Aceh's neighborhoods. They give us an idea of what this 'better' could mean.

Tarmizi was in his early thirties and had lost his parents and many of his extended family members in the tsunami. He married less than a year after the disaster and in 2009

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<sup>184</sup> See 'Post-reconstruction Aceh: Leftover problems' *Jakarta Post*, 26 December 2009.

<sup>185</sup> See Barter (2011) for an analysis of the 2009 elections.

he lived with his wife and his three year old son in a newly built tsunami aid house in his old neighborhood. Their living conditions were poor, in part because Tarmizi did not have a steady job. Despite his difficult situation he often told me how he kept the spirits up (*tetap semangat*). He often connected his ideas for the future of Aceh to his hopes for the future of his son, whom he wanted to give a good education:

Aceh has changed because of the new buildings and infrastructure, but also for example in the area of education. We have better technologies now. Schools teach more languages. Before, we used to learn English. Now they also offer Japanese, Dutch, French, and Arab. After the tsunami, education has much improved. Every school now has a lab [laboratory] with computers. Before, I did not know how to handle a computer. Now primary school children know how to do it. There is internet; it is a time of major change. (...) I really hope that Aceh will be more developed (*maju*) in the future. That is, in the sense of technological development and of education. We should improve Aceh in the sense of education. It is important that [our students] go to the Netherlands, to America, and to Germany to learn. Then they can bring pride to Aceh, because of their knowledge (*ilmu tinggi*). Aceh does not want to lose, does not want to retreat; it wants to go forward / develop (*maju*). Today, we see how extraordinary the world outside (*dunia luar*) is; the food and electronic products that they [people outside Aceh] can make. Aceh will also be like them.

Later, Tarmizi also sketched the relations between these ‘modern’ developments and ‘traditional’ community values:

Together we rebuilt our neighborhood. It is something we did together; we never lost hope, we went on struggling. (...) [I value] both the ordinary people and the modern people (*masyarakat awam dan masyarakat moderen*). In this neighborhood we use a certain system, it is like a symbol. It means that we do not use modern languages, languages that people may not know, modern languages that they perhaps do not understand. So, because of the everyday mingling with the people, I use Acehnese, even though I do speak Indonesian and English. By using the right language in the right place, people won’t feel jealous. If they do not speak Indonesian, they do not feel sidelined.

All the people I met in his neighborhood spoke Indonesian well (like almost everyone in Banda Aceh). One could say that Tarmizi here adopts a paternalistic attitude of knowing more than his neighbors. Although that may be so, I would also argue that it points to a specific aspect of what he sees as ‘modernity’ and what he sees as a better future for Aceh.



Modernity in this perception is associated with ‘the world outside’, with things people can adopt from this world outside – predominantly knowledge and technology – and the tools to do this – predominantly language and education. ‘Ordinary’ language, in Tarmizi’s account, is needed to keep cohesion, while ‘modern’ language is needed to advance, to develop. Improvement, for Tarmizi, has everything to do with Aceh’s place-in-the-world (Ferguson 2006), with the ‘outside world’ recognizing Aceh as a ‘modern’ player, so that “Aceh will also be like them.” While Tarmizi’s account resonates with the state’s development discourse, pointing to a change towards modernity in education and language, it also reformulates this discourse in a much more globalized way by defining modernity in terms of international relations and skills. His idea of the future of Aceh reflects his subjectivity and positioning with his background of a community broker with NGO contacts as well as his plans for his son’s education. At the same time, it reflects an image of Aceh’s past and future that was widespread among ordinary people in Aceh in the post-tsunami years. Tarmizi’s reflections therefore give us a sense of how images of Acehnese futures are produced and reproduced, while being influenced but never totally determined by the state.

## **Conclusion**

The tsunami was, in different ways and by different social actors, seen as a starting point for improvement. As a destined event given from divine wisdom, many people thought of the tsunami as revealing a divine message as well as showing that they were part of God’s plan. Many Muslims in Aceh understood the tsunami in an Islamic temporality in which one’s own death and the end of the world are predetermined. In this perspective, during their time in the world people can improve themselves and society and the tsunami was often seen as a warning, a punishment, or a test that was given to show the need for such improvements. The idea of the tsunami as an opportunity for religious improvement was for many people entangled with the idea that the disaster was a starting point for the improvement of everyday living conditions or ‘development’. This narrative of improvement as development was not only expressed in a context of (inter)national attention for ‘building back better’ and concurrent ‘expectations of modernity’ (Ferguson 1999), but also built on an idea of Aceh and Aceh’s place-in-the-world (Ferguson 2006) that has developed over the last century. In its institutional form, the development discourse draws on a temporality of linear progress. In everyday Aceh, it intersected with the temporality of nostalgia and ‘return’ to a glorious Acehnese past, which we saw in chapter one. These different temporalities, expressed in the idea of the tsunami as an opportunity for improvement, coexisted and interrelated in aspirations and expectations in post-tsunami Banda Aceh. Institutional discourses are very influential in creating future imaginaries, yet they do not totally determine the dynamics of these and other imaginaries

in everyday life. It is exactly in their everyday expectations and aspirations that people creatively appropriate and adapt state discourses, while imagining and shaping their own futures and the future of Aceh.