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

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

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Summary

This dissertation addresses the question of what it means to remake everyday life in the shadow of disaster. Focusing on the city of Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in the years after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004, it explores how tsunami survivors have been remaking the everyday ever since that moment. The dissertation is based on ethnographic research that I conducted in Banda Aceh for a total of more than twelve months in 2007-2008, 2009, 2010 and 2012. The many stories about the tsunami and the subsequent reconstruction process that people told me during those fieldwork periods became leading in this dissertation as they made me focus on what was important for tsunami survivors in the post-disaster years.

I found that it was not only social, economic, political and historical developments and changes that mattered in this post-disaster process of remaking the everyday, but also subjective experiences, personal histories and individual creativity. In this dissertation, I propose to use the concept of 'subjectivity' to bring together the social and the individual in the study of post-disaster remaking. A focus on subjectivity shows how the social influences individual experiences, while individuals at the same time create the social world from their personal experiences and histories. I argue that the anthropology of disaster can be enriched by using the concept of subjectivity. Whereas the anthropology of disaster has up to now predominantly focused on post-disaster social change and continuity and on structural historical patterns of vulnerability and resilience, the ethnography of subjectivity can illuminate how individual experiences and creativity matter in relation to these socio-historical contexts. At the same time, it is especially in post-disaster situations that subjectivity is remade in sometimes radically new ways. Therefore, it is especially the study of crises and their aftermaths that can shed light on the ways in which subjectivity is created.

In the five chapters of this dissertation I discuss different dimensions of the process of remaking post-tsunami everyday life. Tsunami survivors often told me that after the disaster they had to 'start from zero'. Chapter one begins by asking what this starting from zero looked like by drawing on the stories people told me about the first days, months and years. It describes the complex post-tsunami social arena in which many different players, including hundreds of international organizations, participated to reconstruct Aceh. I point out the lack of information, the uncertainty and the disappointment that tsunami survivors experienced with the organization of reconstruction assistance, which are exemplified in their expectations of 'proposals' for reconstruction aid. Housing became by far the most important issue in the reconstruction process. Housing was one of the basic needs of tsunami survivors, but arguably this is not the only reason why it became much more important than other dimensions of reconstruction. I suggest that because houses are visible and measurable, they provided a form of assistance that governmental as well as non-governmental organizations could easily account for with their donors and that therefore could become a measure of success. Moreover, unlike other post-disaster needs, housing was promised on an individual (or family) basis. Those families who had lost a house would receive a new house. As the intention was to simply replace houses that had

been lost rather than addressing the needs of particular families, through the task of building houses governmental and non-governmental organizations could neglect addressing socio-political inequalities.

The focus on housing also illuminates the very different attitudes of tsunami survivors towards the governmental agency that led the reconstruction process (BRR) on the one hand and international aid agencies on the other. While people in Aceh held the Indonesian government accountable for failures to live up to the promise of housing through private complaints as well as public protests, they were generally just grateful towards the international community that came to help Aceh – even though there were also problems with aid delivered by international aid agencies. This attitude of gratitude towards what people often called ‘the world’ has to be seen in the context of the thirty years long secession conflict during which Aceh had been closed off from ‘the world’ and that ended only eight months after the tsunami. Many people in Aceh commented that they were now finally seen by the international community; that the whole world now knew where Aceh was. They explicitly glossed post-tsunami assistance that was given by the international community as ‘gifts’ for which they were thankful. Some scholars have described post-disaster aid in the form of ‘gifts’ that actively require gratitude as humiliating. However, I suggest that, as gifts also entail recognition, people in Aceh actively reciprocated this recognition with gratitude to remake long standing relationships with the international community and thus a place-in-the-world for Aceh. Therefore, the gift of post-disaster aid is not necessarily humiliating. On the contrary, in this context it is enabling. It is in this way that people in Aceh remade their subjectivities in relation to Indonesia and the international community, with a strong focus on a special Acehness.

Chapter two turns to people’s stories about the tsunami. I show how the body is central to the narrative experience of the tsunami and how it brings together the ‘narrative event’ and the ‘narrated event’ of the tsunami as it is the site of experience through time. The body is both central in the embodied narration of the tsunami and in the stories about the disaster. The out-of-placeness of bodies – dead, wounded, naked, transformed, missing – during and after the tsunami came to define the out-of-the-ordinariness of the disaster in relation the continuous remaking of the everyday. By focusing on the tsunami narratives of women and men, I draw attention to experiences of the tsunami and the roles they play in the remaking of everyday life. However, these stories also show that ‘remaking’ is no straightforward process and that some things cannot be remade. In the last part of the chapter, I focus on rumors of child trafficking that keep creating uncertainty for parents who never found the bodies of their missing children. The loss of the children and the uncertainty about their fate become part of the everyday that people live with. These rumors moreover call into question the assumptions that rumors are about believing or not believing and that people use rumors as metaphors to talk about the social world. Rumors, I suggest, rather create uncertainty because of the ever lingering possibility that they are true. In this case, the near impossibility of finding out about this truth, means that in their narratives people may contain multiple versions of the past and thus multiple possible futures, that may be hopeful, but also anxious and uncertain.

In chapter three I look at the process of post-tsunami grieving by exploring the subjective ways in which people dealt with loss, memories and emotions. According to a dominant discourse in Aceh, people rapidly overcame their grief after the tsunami because of the religious piety of the Islamic Acehnese. This discourse seems to limit the possibilities for grieving as the norm is that one should not grieve. However, for many people grieving is closely intertwined with religious practices. People often described grieving as a process towards a form of 'not always' remembering. By slowly giving the tsunami memories appropriate 'places', such as prayer and giving alms, but also in photographs and yearly commemorations, they move to a condition in which they do not continuously remember the disaster. Religious concepts, such as *pasrah* (surrender) and *ikhlas* (sincerity), and religious practices, such as prayer and giving alms, are very important to this process. Instead of somehow being 'outside' religion, grieving is therefore meshed with religion in multiple ways. However, by looking at the narratives about grieving, I also point out that Islam is not the only moral framework in which people understand the process of grieving. The concepts of *trauma* and *stres* as well as the notion that sadness is 'human', help to make grieving a morally acceptable process. The last part of this chapter discusses the silences in narratives and the moments in which people reflect on what they cannot or do not want to express. This discussion thereby points at the limits of what researchers can and should want to know.

Chapter four addresses a different dimension of remembering and forgetting, as it focuses on collective memory in urban space, thereby pointing out how time becomes situated in space. The tsunami devastated large parts of the city of Banda Aceh and many people told me that in the days and weeks following the disaster they thought no one would ever live there again. However, in the following years the city was totally reconstructed. In many places, the effects of the tsunami have become less and less visible. While many places keep evoking memories of the tsunami and of the time before the tsunami, rebuilding and remaking also necessarily mean forgetting. It is in the interface with this spatial forgetting that some tsunami monuments and memorial places stand out and have gained symbolic power. I point at the politics of the construction and promotion of these memorial places as they not only support a future oriented narrative of 'building back better' but at the same time mask the forgetting of the conflict and the grievances of the past. However, the tsunami monuments and memorial places are also affective sites that are visited by tourists and appreciated by residents of Banda Aceh as sites where future generations will be able to see how devastating the tsunami was.

Throughout the dissertation, I show how time is an 'actor' in the remaking of everyday life. It 'acts' on experience and narration, on grieving and memory, on the remaking of subjectivities in a historical context. However, in chapter five time and temporality become even more central. This chapter focuses on people's explanations for the tsunami and their expectations of the future. The Indonesian government nurtured the idea of the tsunami as an opportunity for improvement, for building back better, but this idea was also widespread among people in Aceh. People in Aceh explained the tsunami as an act of God from which they should learn. Whether interpreted as a warning, a punishment, a test, or a lesson, in all these explanations the tsunami was seen as a God given moment for change,

an opportunity for improving oneself and society to become more Islamic. Because the tsunami was also seen as a sign that the end of the world was imminent, the need to improve one's religious behavior became more pressing. At the same time, people also saw the disaster as an opportunity for moving towards modernity. The attention that Aceh received from 'the world' in the post-tsunami years raised the expectations of and aspirations for a modern, developed, Islamic Aceh, that would get an important place in the world, as it once did in the mythic glorious past of the seventeenth century. This chapter points out how Islam and the development towards modernity are based on different notions of time. Nevertheless, the tsunami and the following improvement momentum made both of these temporalities more present and highly relevant to the process of remaking the post-tsunami everyday.

I conclude that through the ethnography of subjectivity we can better understand the long-term process of remaking everyday life after a disaster. Ultimately, this approach and the social realities that it illuminates, sheds light on our common humanity as well as the different, subjective paths that people take and create in the aftermath of crisis.