Annemarie Samuels, *After the Tsunami: Disaster Narratives and the Remaking of Everyday Life in Aceh*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020, 214 pp., ISBN: 9780824878269, price: USD 68.00 (hardback); ISBN: 9780824888282, price: USD 28.00 (paperback).

The book under review is an anthropological account of the 2004 tsunami and the experiences of its survivors in Banda Aceh, northern Sumatra, Indonesia. Fieldwork was conducted by the author several years after the catastrophe—at intervals between 2007 and 2013—through “a wide range of observations, informal interactions and recorded interviews” (p. 11). The book seeks to understand “what it means to remake everyday life in the face of overwhelming loss and destruction and in a context of humanitarian aid and political change” (p. 3). It focuses on three categories of tsunami-related representations, i.e. the understanding and contextualization of disaster experience, the resilience and management of memory, and cultural adaption (pp. 6–7). It aims to explore “the magnitude of the experience of disaster” and “the magnitude of the subjective work of remaking the world in its wake” (p. 11).

Samuels argues that the success (and failure) of post-tsunami reconstruction depends as much on physical and psychological factors as the making of subjectivity. In order to start life anew, survivors of the tsunami coped with the disastrous experience in varying ways, based on their past knowledge of disasters, their engagement with disaster relief organizations, and their exposure to the new social and political circumstances after the catastrophe. Their narratives convey different layers of subjective representations, depending on their connection with such external factors. Listening to these different layers of narratives, according to Samuels, helps government and non-government agencies in setting up reconstruction programs. However, post-disaster reconstruction also operates beyond physical and individual spheres. In the context of the Aceh tsunami, it revolves around what it means to give a place to a group of people experiencing a huge scale of loss in order to collectively start life anew.

The organization of the book shows Samuels' skills in narrating and re-telling, and the quality of her field observations. Chapter 1 presents a portrait of tsunami-related experiences shortly after the event. Samuels carefully categorizes the information she collected into two narrative clusters. First come the narratives related to the ways her interlocutors gave meaning to their losses in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. Most survivors viewed this experience as a total loss, which forced them start their lives “from zero”. However, their acts of survival differ according to gender, marital status, and access to tsunami aid and relief programs. Samuels spotlights several cases of female

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survivors who struggled hard to move to a safe temporary place. Their narrative reveals the author's emphatic yet critical position towards those survivors. Most survivors had lost husbands, wives, children, or parents. Many soon (re-)married during the period of re-building, for economic, social, and personal reasons. Although they still felt the deep loss of their (previous) family, "having a new family helped them recover" (p. 35). Another key factor was the presence of multi-national aid and relief programs, which helped individual survivors to reconstruct their lives and improve their economic conditions. During this phase of recovery, survivors created a strong sense of agency and tended to position themselves as part of a global community—a sense of global citizenship—not least because of the international scale of aid they received.

Chapters 2 and 3 theorize the survivors' narratives of grieving. After overcoming the feeling of shock in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, they began to realize their interrupted connection to their pre-tsunami lives, following the huge scale of losses they had suffered (family members, houses, neighborhoods). Many survivors survived the catastrophe by living in the devastated physical environment caused by the event. They were close to death and lived their days among the dead. During Samuels' interviews several years after December 2004, they spoke of dead bodies "without identifying" whether the dead were men, women, or children (p. 67). These representations of sorrow occupied the survivors' memories and haunted their lives post-tsunami.

However, as Samuels argues, survivors also developed survival strategies in the longer term. "The profound embodied experience of disorder, insecurity, and instability in survivors' stories emerges narratively only in temporality that includes ... present efforts of remaking a sense of normality, of order" (p. 67). A process of organizing horrible memories into narratives helped them live with their losses and grief. This putting experience into narratives forms an important part of creating a new subjectivity, which is a key element to their post-tsunami lives. Islam or Islam-related narratives were essential to learning to live with the losses. While religious gatherings had been common in pre-tsunami Aceh, their frequency after the tsunami constituted a strategy of collectively mourning and starting life anew. This social reconstruction seems to have worked for the survivors. Yet although they experienced similar degrees of grief, men and women were not expected to express their grief in similar ways. Men and women have gendered expectations on how they will respond to grief, and Islam-related narratives played a key role in structuring this difference.

Chapters 4 and 5 present Samuels' observations on the process of re-settling "normality" of life in the post-post-reconstruction period. This process is explored through discussions of what Samuels calls "the house of memory" and

“the temporal momentum”, concepts that grapple with the overlap of memory, landscape, time, and the need for healing and renewal. The creation of tangible memorializations after the tsunami, such as the tsunami museum, ship monuments, and mass graves, was initiated by the Indonesian government and international agencies. However, for the local Acehnese, these became a way to house the past and to give the losses and the grief a place. Although the memorial sites have different degrees of significance—for example, the ship monuments and the mass graves were seen as “authentic” memorial sites, unlike the tsunami museum (pp. 117–121)—they all symbolize a shared spirit to embrace a new life and future.

The re-making of life began with a shared enthusiasm for improvement. Samuels discusses this through the concept of “temporal momentum”: the moment of opportunity for changes. Stimulated by post-disaster reconstruction slogans of international agencies, like “Building Back Better”, the Acehnese came to believe that the 2004 tsunami created momentum for improvement in many aspects of their daily life. New houses and resettlement compounds, newly paved roads with wide pedestrian paths, new coffee shops, cash relief, and life-skill trainings all provided the Acehnese with immediate representations of post-tsunami life. This hope was blanketed by (Islamic) religious narratives, invoking fate (*takdir*), God’s will (*kehendak Allah*), punishment (*hukuman*) for sinfulness, and trials or lessons of faith (*cobaan, ujian*), which conveyed divine wisdom (*hikmah*) (pp. 134–5, 146–7). So great was this hope that most Acehnese failed to realize that “temporal momentum was temporary” (p. 133). Samuels argues that the “pervasive sense that Aceh was on a track of positive change subsided” when “the humanitarian agencies were leaving and the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency (BRR) had concluded its work” (p. 133). Disappointment ensued when “some felt that Aceh was left on its own” (p. 149). The temporal momentum of improvement shows that “a wide range of social actors” implanted “different imaginations” (p. 148) about the future of post-reconstruction Aceh. When these actors left, the momentum ceased. In the longer term, the Acehnese people “less and less often pointed at the concrete blessings that the tsunami had brought” (p. 150).

After the Tsunami concludes that “post-disaster recovery is a profoundly subjective process. Rather than being limited to the psychological states of inner selves, subjective processes of remaking the world are the work of individuals immersed in a society” (p. 151). Yet the potential of culturally embedded social networks within Acehnese communities is missing in this book. While local communities performed a context-specific mechanism of disaster management, which could be characterized as “social flux” (Nishi and Yamamoto 2012: 65–7), the reconstruction of post-disaster society was arguably an inter-

mingled process that involved culturally embedded social institutions as much as national and international agencies. In the context of the Acehnese society, Islam could have been analyzed as one such culturally embedded institution, functioning beyond the religious sphere. Nevertheless, *After the Tsunami* is a significant contribution to understand the re-making of everyday life in post-tsunami Aceh.

Agus Suwignyo

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

suwignyo_agus@ugm.ac.id

Reference

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