

Book Review: Samuels, A. (2019): After the Tsunami - Disaster Narratives and the Remaking of Everyday Life in Aceh

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Book Review: Samuels, A. (2019). *After the Tsunami: Disaster Narratives and the Remaking of Everyday Life in Aceh.*

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After the Tsunami represents an in-depth study of survivors of the 2004 tsunami in the badly-hit Indonesian province of Aceh. Annemarie Samuels interrogates disaster narratives and the efforts of survivors to remake everyday life in the midst of destruction, loss, humanitarian aid, and political change after decades of an armed conflict that was finally settled in August 2005. The book focuses on how people speak, or remain silent, about the tsunami and its aftermath, and adds important insights to the anthropological study of disasters by exploring how subjectivities are constructed through disaster narratives. Samuels presents her rich ethnographic material and interview excerpts, which were gathered in a period of more than ten years, in a clear and accessible language. This clarity is also reflected in the structure of the book. Its five chapters are organized in a rather linear time fashion, starting with before the tsunami, and finishing with Acehese speculations about a future.

The Introduction makes mention of social science framings of disasters, and sets Annemarie Samuels' work as a continuation of subjectivities studies within psychological anthropology. The author argues that, although scholars call for processual and historically informed analysis of disasters, pointing at asymmetries of power and the social construction of vulnerabilities, for tsunami survivors the framing of the disaster is first and foremost that of an event. She asserts that "post-disaster recovery is not only a social and cultural process, but also a fundamentally subjective one" (p. 7). The author proposes narratives as a methodological device to examine how subjectivities and everyday life are made through them. Narratives, she writes, are also an epistemological device. For example, storytelling itself is an essential component of remaking.

The first chapter looks at the immediate aftermath of the tsunami and centers survivors' agency vis-à-vis Indonesian government representatives and foreign humanitarian aid. Especially with regard to the reconstruction phase, the author skillfully presents how the figure of the local broker and the *proposal*, that is local efforts to approach authorities in a bureaucratically acceptable form, mediate negotiations among citizens and authorities. Taking the issues of housing, citizen complaints of corruption, and time lags or inaction of government

institutions, the author teases out the threads of patronage relations from the village to the national level. These relations were also shaped by decades of conflict whereby Aceh was thought of and often effectively treated as ‘outside of Indonesia’.

By framing humanitarian aid as a gift and actively expressing their thanks, Acehnese narratives of gratitude can be understood in terms of reciprocity linking Acehnese people to the international (humanitarian) community. While certainly the impact on relations between ‘the world’ and Aceh did not translate into lasting international cooperation, this repositioning mattered much for domestic post-disaster and post-conflict politics. This line of thought builds on critiques of humanitarianism that claim beneficiaries are muted when they cannot speak at the global level for themselves. The author argues instead that, although this may be true, in a post-disaster moment local needs may be more pressing than having a global voice: “Although indeed not directly giving people a voice on the global stage, locally, humanitarian aid made disaster survivors speak out loud” (p. 55). By analyzing both narratives of protest and narratives of gratitude, the chapter highlights how people’s agency should not be reduced to resistance towards an overarching force, but rather develops in relation with humanitarian and government actors.

Chapter 2 focuses on embodied narratives of disaster, often retelling the event itself and with abundant metaphors. These narratives often highlight extraordinary human capacities – a girl running like never before; of ruptures with social norms – a naked woman whose clothes had been washed away; or of immense loss – a daughter visiting mass graves, uncertain of where her parents were buried. They are embodied, the author states, in two ways – that is, they are told *through* bodies (phenomenological dimension), and they are *about* bodies (symbolic representation of disruption). By analyzing these narratives, Samuels shows how the remaking of the everyday is infused with the experience of the tsunami.

In her third chapter, Samuels delineates the ways in which Islam shapes grieving, trauma, and remaking. Among a list of religious practices, which include contemplative prayer (*doa*), Islamic ritual worship (*shalat*), and chanting (*zikir*), the author focuses on non-ritualized prayer, namely the individual ways in which people prayed in the moments of and immediately after the disaster, as well as ways of dealing with grief. As embodied practices, they can reposition a person in the social world, for instance following personal ethical projects, but can also have effects on the social world of both the living and the dead. By elaborating on this kind of non-ritualized prayer, which is the most relevant religious practice for tsunami survivors according to Samuels, the author makes an important contribution to the literature on Islamic responses to disasters.

Another important contribution is Samuels’ nuanced analysis of emotion and religion along gender lines that deconstructs taken-for-granted dichotomies. For instance, prescribed roles for men in dealing with grief involve *akal*, reason, while for women it is only ‘natural’ to express emotions uncontrollably. While at first glance this may be the case, the author carefully distinguishes that in the informal settings of the private sphere, many of her interlocutors did not adhere to strict gender roles. The author’s rich ethnographic material reveals that men may cry, remember, and suffer while women may make proficient reference to Islamic values engaging in serious ethical projects of self-disciplining.

In the fourth chapter, the making of urban space and memory is examined. Looking at official discourse, the author traces how politics and affect are entangled in commemorating the past and looking towards the future. Post-disaster settings have proven to be fertile ground for political narratives of overcoming and optimism. In Aceh, the author recognizes how this *narrative triumphalism* intentionally left little room for commemoration of violent histories, starkly overshadowing the legacies of the separatist conflict. This became evident in speeches and brochures, but more importantly in monuments: authentic monuments (*monumen asli*), such as boats pushed inland by the tsunami, and artificial ones, such as the Tsunami Museum.

The final chapter is adequately dedicated to the question of temporality. Framed within Islamic notions of time and destiny, the tsunami has been understood by the author's interlocutors as fate, test, or gift. In Aceh, a temporal optimism accompanied the re-construction phase, something disaster scholars have pointed out before. However, the author expands this well-known fact by carefully distinguishing the timing and the kind of narratives that circulate. While in the early post-disaster phase hardship was explained in religious terms and followed by the improvement momentum of "building back better", later, when international aid had left, and incomplete buildings revealed some of the failures, people turned to explanations of corrupt politics.

The conclusion ties up the book by emphasizing that post-disaster recovery is a long subjective process reflecting the work of individuals immersed in society. This path needs to be searched and carved out by survivors, in their own diverse ways. And this is precisely why the study of individuals' narratives offer such a significant vantage point. The author has revealed a series of paradoxes and ambiguities that infuse post-disaster life: that people in Aceh have an immense capacity to remake life in the face of immense loss; that both remembering, as in prayers and monuments, as well as forgetting, as in traumatic experiences, are necessary for the process of grieving; and that the tsunami can be framed both as misfortune (*musibah*) and as divine wisdom (*hikmah*).

Disaster and crises scholarship has established that crises are moments where much of a society can be reconfigured, and Samuels demonstrates that Aceh is no exception in this regard, having signed a peace agreement and gained special autonomy. While the author builds on much of this literature by studying reconfigurations at political and societal levels, *After the Tsunami* enriches this approach by focusing on the agency of survivors, their narratives, and how they rearrange their everyday lives. The book convincingly shows that narratives are an essential part of the remaking of life in post-disaster contexts.

Overall, the book contributes to the anthropological literature on disasters in Southeast Asia and beyond, and particularly on the intersection of religion and disasters. It provides a unique account of the importance of religious and particularly Islamic practices in post-disaster contexts. Moreover, with a sharp anthropological skill, Eurocentric assumptions such as that aid beneficiaries are helpless and passive are scrutinized from different perspectives, contextualized, and reinterpreted. The author shows how narratives of aid as gift reposition Aceh discursively within North-South asymmetries of power. In a similar vein, Samuels' careful analysis of the remaking of life in Aceh nuances gender analysis by looking at it through the lenses

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of space and scale. *After the Tsunami* is an excellent read, diving deep into intimate moments of people's lived experience. Samuels' findings expand our understanding of framings and makings of disaster in taking us into perhaps some of the deepest layers of social life that anthropology can investigate by examining narratives and subjectivities within the recovery process after a catastrophic event.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniela Paredes Grijalva is a researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences. Her interests include environmental change, mobilities, gender, and disaster in Indonesia. For her doctoral studies at the University of Vienna she has been awarded a DOC Fellowship by the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

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