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Religion and Reconstruction in the Wake of Disaster

Many were they who simply ceased to care,
And coming upon the dead, could only stare.
Bodies crushed by trees on the forest floor,
Might garner a sideways glance, but little more

Of course, there were people who felt pity,
But were averse to express their sympathy
For was it not true that to suffer such a fate,
Had been pre-destined in Doomsday's Slate?

But hear me, dear sirs, my compatriots,
Such thoughts as that are not appropriate.
Under Islamic law this would be contrary;
Misery's a thing we together must carry.

Muhammad Saleh, *Syair Lampung Karam*¹

WHETHER THEY are one-off, or part of cycles, disasters have exerted profound long-term cultural impacts on societies around the world. The verses quoted above, excerpted from a Malay poem written just after the cataclysmic eruption of Krakatau in 1883, comprise part of one cultural artifact produced in response to natural disaster. More specifically, these lines open a window onto the roles that religion, and debates about religious interpretation, can play in post-disaster contexts. In this particular case, the poet first describes an almost stereotypically “fatalist” response on the part of some believers in his Muslim community. Immediately thereafter, however, he turns to make a critical intervention—arguing that in his understanding of Islam, the situation demanded not a retreat into theodicy discourse, but rather a renewed sense of communal solidarity and social action.

History is replete with culturally contextualized and religiously inflected narratives of destruction and recovery, and a growing body of literature continues to explore the relationships between disasters and underlying cultural structures and belief systems, as well as their political and social implications. Greg BANKOFF's (2003) work on the histories of disaster in the Philippines draws upon centuries of records stretching into the colonial period to paint a vivid picture of the constitutive impacts of reoccurring hazards upon everyday life. His work charts how social and political institutions have evolved in the face of hazards to the point where it is impossible to view contemporary Filipino social structures without reference to the long history of its turbulent physical environment. In the adjacent Indonesian archipelago, a long history of seismic disasters has had a significant impact on the long-term reconfiguration of trade routes, which in turn influenced the basic contours of political and religious life in many communities (SIEH et al. 2015). Such recent work across disciplines has demonstrated that the relationships between communities and their volatile environments can carry significant and long-lasting implications on the shaping of cultural and social dynamics that extend far beyond general conversations about societies reacting, and in some cases adapting, to natural hazards. As has been noted in the anthropological and sociological literature on hazards, the changes that take place following a disaster are unscripted—things will be different, but the trajectories of transformation can be unpredictable (OLIVER-SMITH 1996; VAN DEN EYNDE and VENO 1999).

The social transformations that arise in the wake of disasters can interact in complex ways with more explicit and prescribed agendas for change that find voice in contexts of relief and reconstruction. Recent work by anthropologists and sociologists on disasters has focused on aspects of the underlying social and economic conditions of vulnerability to disaster, and the ways in which inequalities can actually be exacerbated by projects for post-disaster development.² This was clearly illustrated, for example, in the disproportionate impact that Hurricane Katrina had upon poor and minority communities in the U.S. Gulf states. Such communities were often located in the most geographically vulnerable areas, such as the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, and were at a major disadvantage in the post-disaster stage in terms of evacuation, provision of resources, and aid to rebuild. Controversial language associated with ethnic cleansing has been part of the debate about the trajectory of reconstruction of New Orleans—with vested interests within the social, political, and economic elite who have openly questioned the wisdom of rebuilding some of the poorer parts of town. In her remarkable ethnography of post-Katrina New Orleans, Vincanne ADAMS (2013) presents critical insights into these political dynamics and the roles played by Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in the reconstruction process.

Our own research in post-tsunami Aceh since 2005 has highlighted cultural impacts and religious transformations that both shaped, and were shaped by, aspects of reconstruction processes (DALY, FEENER, and REID eds. 2012). Through this work we have come to see recovery as a function of affected persons navigating tensions between desires for return to the pre-disaster status quo ante and

diverse processes that have come to characterize reconstruction in terms of projects for development and improvement of previous social conditions (DALY 2015). Within Aceh, such projects were often subsumed under the rubric of the ubiquitous “build back better” slogan, which was widely adopted by the humanitarian sector as a way to ensure that resources spent would reduce vulnerabilities and increase levels of resilience in the face of future hazards. This basic idea—which is certainly laudable—has initiated wider conversations about the disaster as an “opportunity” to create new and better realities on the ground (FAN 2013). In operational terms this led to interventions targeting the underlying pre-disaster social fabric of communities and affected all levels of society, from broadly-mandated “good governance” projects seeking to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of government at village and provincial levels, to gender mainstreaming initiatives that aimed to adjust cultural structures of pre-tsunami society (THORBURN 2007; DALY et al. 2016). Conversations about aid as a means of social change and transformation have arisen in tandem with a dramatic increase in the number and diversity of aid actors and an expansive view of the scope of interventions being pursued in post-disaster situations. However, such efforts to engineer social transformation can sometimes result in profoundly negative outcomes (HARTMAN and SQUIRES 2006; CHANDRASEKARAN 2007; GUNWARDENA and SCHULLER eds. 2008; DALY and RAHMAYATI 2012; KLEIN 2007; SIMPSON 2014).

This increased complexity is changing the dynamics of the humanitarian sector in ways that we are just beginning to comprehend. The intrusion of longer-term development approaches—expressed as linking relief, reconstruction, and development (LRRD)—has destabilized the notions of what a humanitarian encounter should entail, and has changed benchmarks for consensus on appropriate levels of intervention. Furthermore, the emergence of nontraditional humanitarian actors, including faith-based NGOs and other religious organizations, is challenging established orthodoxy within the de-confessionalized humanitarian sector (FEENER and DALY 2016). Their work not only hearkens back to notions of charity drawn from particular religious traditions but is also redefining relationships between aid workers and beneficiaries in significant ways in many contemporary post-disaster contexts (FOUNTAIN, BUSH, and FEENER eds. 2015).

The vast majority of studies on post-disaster reconstruction produced by academics and NGOs focus on monitoring and evaluating processes of physical rebuilding. Material loss of physical infrastructure such as houses, bridges, and schools, is a logical area to focus on, in that they can be accounted for easily, and when presented to both beneficiaries and donors are tangible indications of action and progress. However major disasters bring a wide range of loss—not just measured in financial and material but also in social and cultural terms. Here “religion,” and not just “faith-based organizations,” can be seen as an increasingly important consideration in understanding post-disaster reconstruction projects and their accompanying social transformations.³ In order to understand these complex and broad-ranging transformations we need to further pursue investigations beyond the evaluation of physical rebuilding and institutional arrangements to engage

more broadly with the dynamics of change in the spheres of culture and religion as well.⁴

In recent years a flurry of work has appeared on the subject of disaster and religion. This special issue seeks to both contribute to these discussions and to nudge conversations in new directions. Much recent scholarship has focused on the role of religious organizations and individual participants in disaster relief and reconstruction work. On a more conceptual level, some of the most oft-cited work on the subject to date has engaged primarily with issues of theodicy.⁵ While the trauma of loss and processes of recovery certainly have prompted some adherents of diverse religious traditions to wrestle with such questions, theodicy is by no means the only, nor necessarily even the most important, mode through which religion is engaged and reevaluated in the wake of disaster.⁶ In post-tsunami Aceh, for example, the impact of the disaster and the experience of its aftermath were conceptualized by survivors in ways that included, but also extended well beyond, those of classical theodicy discourse.⁷ In an initial mapping of Acehese interpretations of the earthquake and tsunami it was noted that while there were some who regarded these events as purely natural disasters, many Acehese understood the tragedy as originating from God. However, God's hand was perceived to be at work in the event in diverse ways, ranging from divine retribution for the sins of the people, to a test of faith, or something preordained regardless of human actions in the world. As Annemarie SAMUELS (2015) has insightfully demonstrated, the disaster also altered conceptions of religious and worldly temporalities that came to inform diverse projects for rebuilding individual lives and communities.

Published collections of tsunami survivor narratives contain numerous accounts framed in expressly religious terms, with frequent references to the ways in which mosques (often the only buildings to survive the shocks of quake and wave) provided shelter and salvation for those fleeing the disaster (SALEH 2005). Official publications from the Acehese provincial government also elaborated upon what was perceived to be God's meaning and purpose behind such disasters, including: 1) to raise the quality of religious faith; 2) a chance for those struck by tragedy to gain religious merit; 3) a means of having one's sins forgiven; 4) an opportunity for God to grant mercy to those who are patient in accepting their fate; and 5) God's test to see who truly has faith—"like gold that is tested by fire to separate the pure from the false" (SANNY 2008, 157–63). These sources clearly demonstrate that, even among adherents of the same tradition sharing the experience of a particular disaster, there can be myriad religious interpretations of the event, and that scholarly tendencies to emphasize questions of existential meaning can misrepresent local interpretations of disaster.

The particular forms that responses may take in any religious tradition can indeed be as diverse as the individuals that comprise a community of believers. In post-disaster contexts, "religion" needs to be appreciated not only as an object to be invoked as an explanatory mechanism by those in crisis, but also as a dynamic category. In post-disaster contexts, the very idea of "religion" sometimes comes to be rethought by diverse parties who draw selectively on and dynamically interpret

canonical texts and traditions as they engage with a host of other ideas and influences that manifest themselves through contemporary humanitarian encounters.

One of the striking things about many of the Muslim responses to the 2004 Aceh tsunami was the emphasis on considerations of “opportunity” and the future lives of believers—a forward-looking ethos that overshadowed a sense of the disaster serving as a kind of retribution for past sins. Indeed, many local understandings of the meaning of the event emphasized what changed its wake, often highlighting the impact it was perceived to have on social life and the practice of religion.⁸ The devastation was seen as accelerating the peace process, which increased social stability and allowed for the lifting of curfews, which in turn made it possible for people to pursue religious activities more freely and easily than they had been able to during the conflict. At the same time, some local Muslim activists and academics began to promote ideas of Islam and the implementation of Shari‘a in particular as helping to prepare for and mitigate future disasters (FAKHRI 2007).

Although the foundations of Aceh’s Islamic legal system were laid at the turn of the twenty-first century, reactions to the implementation of Islamic law from the broader Acehnese public were mixed at best during its first few years.⁹ Although the zealous imposition of humiliating and at times violent punishments by both spontaneous mobs of village men and more organized bands of vigilantes comprised of students from Islamic schools made news headlines and filled the air of coffee shops in many parts of Aceh after the announcement of the establishment of the state Shari‘a system,¹⁰ the initial period following the formal establishment of Aceh’s Islamic legal system had actually made only a modest impact on Acehnese society. Despite the state’s intentions, the proclaiming of a new Islamic legal system did not appear to significantly undermine local support for the separatist Free Aceh Movement or suppress the level of violence, nor did it energize new understandings and experiences of Islam among the broader population.

This situation, however, changed dramatically in the wake of the tsunami, as the overwhelming destruction forced a reconsideration of priorities on many sides and reinvigorated peace negotiations, culminating with the signing of the Helsinki Accords in August 2005. The newly established peace created a safer and more stable space for the interventions of disaster relief and recovery missions—allowing governments and a host of diverse nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to pursue their own projects of relief, rehabilitation, and development largely undisturbed by the kinds of violence that had previously made such interventions nearly impossible in Aceh.

In the wake of the tsunami came a massive influx of foreign aid workers who brought with them ideas and models of both immediate disaster relief, and of reconstruction projects for the long-term transformation of society.¹¹ The efforts and agendas of international aid programs varied in many ways, but they generally shared a broad discursive framework that emphasized the goal of linking relief, rehabilitation, and development (LRRD) in response to the disaster.¹² A defining trope of this was an emphasis on the importance of going beyond immediate post-disaster recovery and using the opportunity provided by the trauma to develop not

only physical infrastructure, but also new modes of good governance that emphasized capacity building and sustainability (MULTIDONOR FUND 2006). This repertoire of models for remaking society in post-disaster contexts that informed the work of so many agencies and NGOs in Aceh at that time also came to be drawn upon by Islamic religious leaders and state Shari‘a officials. In that context, the idea of using Islamic law as a tool for social engineering was amplified through an increasingly pervasive rhetoric of “total reconstruction.” While massive destruction wrought by the 2004 tsunami leveled many existing structures, both physical and organizational, at the same time it also opened up space for rebuilding Acehnese society from the ground up—and this was seen as a great opportunity for local religious leaders aspiring to transform society in light of their visions of the Shari‘a.

Like many of the secular stakeholders in Aceh’s post-tsunami reconstruction, the ideological supporters of the new Shari‘a system saw tremendous opportunities to transform society according to their own ideals of progress in the wake of the tsunami. The vision of the architects of this Islamic legal system has been emphatically future-oriented, and the first head of the State Shari‘a Agency, Alyasa ABUBAKAR (2008, 81), made a point of repeatedly arguing that, “Acehnese society does not want and will not try to turn back the clock.”¹³ Here we are presented with a striking example of religion functioning not as a tradition to cling to for stability, but rather as a site of activist projects for shaping the future in post-disaster contexts. Thus, in cases such as Aceh after the 2004 tsunami, religion is seen not only as important to reactions to the disaster itself, but also for understanding the broader social and cultural dynamics of reconstruction. The complex entanglements of the state Shari‘a project with the massive reconstruction efforts and fraught political climate of post-tsunami Aceh highlight the roles that religion can and does play—not just in coping with loss, but also in staking out new claims in the wake of disaster.¹⁴

Well beyond Aceh and Islam, recent fieldwork by anthropologists and religious studies scholars is beginning to reveal how, in the course of such encounters, significant shifts can occur in the social and political configurations of religion in diverse communities. Edward SIMPSON’s work (2014), for example, has shown how the 2001 Gujarat earthquake provided new opportunities for Hindu nationalists to make significant inroads in terms of their political, ritual, and cultural endeavors. In her contribution to this special issue, Malini Bhattacharjee further investigates these developments to produce a nuanced account of the dynamics of change in this region, arguing that, while the earthquake event and relief processes did expand the influence and role of Hindutva-affiliated actors, these shifts involved more of an acceleration of existing trends rather than sharp rupture or radical reconfiguration. Taken together, the accounts of the aftermath of the earthquake in Gujarat by Simpson and Bhattacharjee provide compelling reminders of the ways in which post-disaster contexts provide opportunities for the assertion of both religious and political agendas.

While also addressing religion and politics, Jonathan Benthall’s analysis of “puripetal” tendencies in both Islam and humanitarianism takes these themes in

quite different directions. Benthall argues that Islam and humanitarianism share a common tendency toward purity-seeking and that this feature proves to be a more fertile space for comparative analysis than tired sacred-secular distinctions. Benthall's approach thereby helpfully directs analytical attention at a range of secular formations, and in so doing he breaks new ground in discussions of religion and disaster relief.

Post-disaster contexts have shaped significant shifts in local understandings of "religion" in communities across diverse traditions. Here again, the issue of religion and disaster extends well beyond issues of theodicy, impacting new conceptualizations of authority, institutions, and expectations of religion in many communities. Elizabeth HARRIS's (2013) work has highlighted the profound transformations in some modern Buddhist contexts, particularly in traditional patterns of religious giving. In his article in this special issue, Jeffrey Samuels builds on Harris's observations to examine the ways in which Buddhist temples mobilized within the contested religious and ethnic ecologies of Malaysia and Sri Lanka in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The contribution here by Philip Fountain focuses on similar questions, but on more personal and institutional levels. In his ethnographic account of the inter-faith encounter between Mennonite Central Committee workers and Acehese Muslims after the same disaster, Fountain argues that what was regarded as "religious" was a matter under constant negotiation. Here, the politics of religion is located as an emergent process in which, as a consequence of relational and embodied learning, new understandings and practices become possible.

Looking at cultural forms associated with Shinto traditions in Japan, Ken Miichi's article presents a remarkable look into the dynamics through which various folk performing arts were first devastated by the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake and then actively rejuvenated during the periods of recovery and reconstruction. In doing so, Miichi points to some of the complex roles that disaster and relief can play on the performance and perception of ritual. As he points out, however, whether such rituals are identified as "religious" or not is a matter of considerable contestation within contemporary Japanese society. These arguments have taken shape against a broader backdrop of challenges in public perceptions of "religion" in Japan, as traced by Levi McLaughlin. In McLaughlin's article we find a description of how the public presentation of religious organizations since the 2011 disasters has negotiated a new place for religion in the context of relief and reconstruction. Religion's changing fortunes in Japan suggest the need to treat religion not as a static feature of the social landscape but rather as a "moving object" with its own distinctive biographies and trajectories (FEENER, FOUNTAIN, and BUSH 2015).

Given this perspective, understanding religion in post-disaster contexts must involve more than simply looking at how local actors selectively engage and interpret established doctrinal repertoires to make sense of tragedy and loss. Rather, we must also look at how both the trauma of catastrophe and the profound social disruptions of contemporary reconstruction projects come to reshape the more

fundamental ways in which “religion” and its place within society become reconceptualized in particular communities. Taken together, the articles presented in this special issue of *Asian Ethnology* present windows onto diverse post-disaster landscapes in which religion has played significant—and diverse—roles in reconfigurations of culture and politics, while also pointing to the ways in which conceptions of “religion” itself come to be transformed in the process.

NOTES

1. Taken from John McGlynn’s translation of SALEH (2014, 40–41).
2. Such is the case even with some projects that are popularly hailed as focusing on the needs and concerns of aid recipients, such as that of “Owner-Driven Reconstruction” (ODR). For a critical examination of ODR and its implementation in diverse social, political, and economic contexts, see THIRUPPUGAZH (2015).
3. On the contested definition of “Religious NGOs” and the importance of transcending conventional classifications, see FOUNTAIN (2013).
4. For more on the former, see KRÜGER et al. eds. (2015); on the latter, see FOUNTAIN, BUSH, and FEENER eds. (2015).
5. This particular aspect of responses to the 2004 tsunami in a community in Southern Thailand has been explored by Claudia MERLI (2010).
6. Some scholars of religion, in fact, have recently come to reemphasize the important role that religion plays in dealing with situations of crisis, both on a personal and communal level. As Martin RIESEBRODT (2010, 173) has eloquently expressed it: “Religion is a system of practices especially concerned with warding off and overcoming crisis situations. Religion not only makes it possible for the inexplicable to be explained; it also maintains people’s ability to act in situations in which they run up against their own limits.”
7. Reza IDRIA’S (2010) work provides detailed investigations into the great diversity of ways in which the disaster was understood by local Muslims, drawing on selections and interpretations of elements from the textual traditions available to them.
8. The following section on the Islamic legal system in post-tsunami Aceh is drawn from FEENER (2013).
9. Five years before the tsunami hit, the Indonesian government had already established provisions for the implementation of Islamic law in the province as part of a broader strategy to put an end to the violent conflict with the secessionist Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka/GAM). Starting in 1999, a series of new “Special Autonomy” measures introduced by the Indonesian central government in attempts to undercut local support for GAM made it possible to both reform existing institutions for the administration of Islamic law in the province and to establish a new Islamic legal system in Aceh. Provisions for the state implementation of Islamic law are contained in regional regulations referred to locally as *qanun*. Aside from two *qanun* dealing with the formation of specific Shari’a institutions, the first of these new laws passed was Qanun No. 11/2002, which marked a new level of symbolic state engagement with the particulars of Islamic belief and practice by bringing these aspects of religious observance under the rubric of regional regulation (*qanun*). In terms of formal law enforcement, however, the most significant of Aceh’s current Shari’a regulations have been three laws passed in 2003: No. 12 on the consumption of alcohol, No. 13 on gambling, and No. 14 on inappropriate mixing of the sexes (*khalwat*). The state institutions for the implementation of Islamic law in contemporary Aceh include a number of distinct but inter-related bodies. In this system, the State Shari’a Agency performs coordinating functions in working with the other major institutions involved with the implementation of Islamic law in contemporary Aceh: the Shari’a Courts, the Ulama Council, and the Shari’a Police. The main

thrust of the State Shari'a Agency (DSI)'s work, however, has been toward the promotion of Shari'a sensibilities around social development issues. The DSI is structured into four main sections, of which only one is primarily involved with activity in the formal legal sphere. Most of the agency's work is directed toward the promotion of religious and social agendas that extend well beyond the formal legal sphere.

10. On Shari'a vigilantism in contemporary Aceh, see SYIHAB (2010).

11. For extensive documentation of these massive relief and reconstruction efforts, see TELFORD, COSGRAVE, and HOUGHTON (2006). For a critical overview of these developments drawing on the Tsunami Evaluation Committee (TEC) reports, see also TELFORD (2012).

12. For more on the LRRD paradigm and its role in shaping responses to disaster in Aceh, see CHRISTOPLOS and WU (2012).

13. Indeed, even while some at times rhetorically evoke the past glories of the Acehese sultanate during its seventeenth-century "golden age," returning to a premodern model of Islamic law is not the primary motivation of the majority of people involved with the current experiment in establishing a Shari'a system in Aceh.

14. For studies on a wide range of responses to post-tsunami social transformations by NGOs, suburban youth, housewives, punk rockers, diasporan political activists, small business owners, and religious scholars (male and female) associated with traditionalist Islamic schools in Aceh, see FEENER, KLOOS, and SAMUELS eds. (2015).

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