

# Review article

## Public image-events and private disaster narratives in post-Reformasi Indonesia

SAMUELS ANNEMARIE. *After the tsunami: disaster narratives and the remaking of everyday life in Aceh*. xiv, 199 pp., map, illus., bibliogr. Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2019. £68.00 (cloth)

STRASSLER KAREN. *Demanding images: democracy, mediation, and the image-event in Indonesia*. 368 pp., illus., bibliogr. Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2020, £24.99 (paper)

The political landscape of Indonesia has changed significantly since the Reformasi (reform) movement and its promise of democratization and decentralization, which marked the end of the authoritarian Suharto regime in the late 1990s. Karen Strassler's *Demanding images* and Annemarie Samuels's *After the tsunami* make important contributions to anthropological accounts of the country in the intervening period.

*Demanding images* catches the eye through its marvellous design and visual appeal, starting with a photo essay and continuing with illustrations throughout, as well as its elegant, witty, and exact prose. Building on her work on photography in Java (Strassler 2010), Strassler now takes a step further, examining the fragmented Indonesian public sphere and its dominant forms of mediation, which emerged from the 'crisis

of authority and authenticity' (p. 222) following the democratic transition. She theorizes the way images operate in this recently democratized public sphere as 'image-events', political happenings in which a set of images becomes 'a focal point of discursive and affective engagement across diverse publics' (pp. 9-10) and which spark debates, speculations, and ludic critiques concerning political affiliation and the very nature of these publics. Strassler conceives of all images as events (albeit to different degrees), whose indexical meaning and context can never be definitively determined. But, she argues, they have become increasingly ungovernable due to the 'ease, speed, and scale' (p. 13) of their production and circulation. She provides an account of publics and media, rather than individual voices, complementing more ethnographic accounts on democratic culture in Indonesia (cf. Long 2016).

By introducing paradigmatic image-events in each of the book's five chapters, Strassler examines the multiple, creative ways in which images are (re)produced and cited in different media and received by different publics. Chapter 1 contrasts ludic modifications of money with the panic around authentically issued counterfeit banknotes, which surfaced with the monetary crisis in 1997 and were almost impossible to identify. Obvious 'fake money' was produced, for instance, with the image of presidential candidate Megawati Sukarnoputri, then indexing the Reformasi movement's democratic hopes and nostalgia for Megawati's father, first President and national hero Sukarno. In contrast to evidentiary authenticity, these banknotes claimed political, financial, and moral authenticity and thus constituted 'a copy that aim[ed] to generate its original' (p. 56), renouncing the official currency adorned with Suharto's portrait, which had come to stand for corruption and autocracy. This

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establishes the contrast between the two modes of producing and receiving images – evidentiary and ludic – that Strassler regards as dominant in the Indonesian public sphere, which runs through the book. It becomes particularly evident in chapter 3, in which Strassler contrasts the dubious role of a self-declared ‘telematics expert’ in discerning the authenticity of revelatory images in corruption and sex scandals with the playful ways in which internet activists mocked this figure precisely for his fetishization of authenticity.

Throughout, Strassler unpacks ambiguities around the unfulfilled promise of accountability through transparency that had fuelled the Reformasi movement. The transparency-related theme of nudity and anxieties around pornography span a series of chapters: from the lack of ‘authentic evidence’ (p. 68) for the rapes of ethnically Chinese women (chap. 2) out of fear that these images might be misused in a pornographic way, to sex scandals (chap. 3), to a piece of art intended to critique dull middle-class consumerism but interpreted by Muslim conservatives as pornography (chap. 4). Strassler sharply dissects different concepts of public visibility and conflicting semiotic ideologies, which envision a public sphere governed either by freedom of expression or by religious morality (chap. 4).

Strassler spans the arc from the hopeful mood in 1998 to the disillusioned atmosphere fifteen years later, in which anxieties around the unruliness of images combined with increased options for their production and manipulation had become ever more acute. Transparency had failed to deliver democratic accountability and the question of whether Suharto’s time might not actually have been better had become an ever-louder murmur. Aply, the book concludes with the 2014 elections, which Strassler interprets as ‘a referendum on Indonesian democracy’ (p. 222), manifested in the choice between ex-general Prabowo Subianto, prefiguring a return to militarism and authoritarianism, and the continuation of – albeit technocratic – democracy in the figure of Joko Widodo, ‘Jokowi’, who eventually won. Strassler ends on a cautiously optimistic note, arguing that the Jokowi craze ‘showed that dreams of an authentic politics are still vital, if as yet unrealized’ (p. 243). Since then, the contest between different political and semiotic ideologies as well as the disillusionment with democracy have intensified. The 2019 elections were not cast in terms of saving democracy: more progressive activists advocated for a boycott of the election (*golput*) rather than voting for either candidate – again, Jokowi and Prabowo – both of whom they saw as representing oligarchic interests (Duile 2021). Memes with jokes like ‘buy one, get one free’ that circulated when re-elected Jokowi made his archenemy Minister of Defence only demonstrate the need to extend Strassler’s work into the present.

*Demanding images* is a brilliant and enjoyable book, providing a comprehensive account of Indonesia’s conflicted post-autocratic public sphere, based on profound ethnographic and historical knowledge. Strassler’s theoretical impulses concerning our understanding of images and mediation are of interest for scholars of (democratic) publics and politics beyond regional specialization.

In contrast to the macro scale of *Demanding images*, Samuels’s *After the tsunami* is a classic ethnography, dealing with the recovery process after the 2004 tsunami in post-disaster Aceh, in and around the capital Banda Aceh. The book relies on long-term ethnographic research with a focus on the period between 2007 and 2009 and provides insight into the ‘process of remaking everyday life’ (p. 26) through a focus on narratives and subjectivity. Drawing on Das (2007), Samuels argues that rather than being a tacit, implicit component of life, ‘the everyday’ is a precarious category ‘requiring continuous work to remake and maintain’ (p. 153), and particularly so in the aftermath of a disruptive crisis like the tsunami. Her key argument is that recovery after the tsunami, which, according to different estimates, killed between 130,000 and 200,000 people in Aceh (p. 2), has been a subjective process of remaking, requiring a considerable amount of work. This process, Samuels argues, is accompanied by ambiguous impulses of remembering and forgetting, grieving and not grieving, and eventually results in the establishment of a ‘new normal’ rather than a return to a previous status quo.

Samuels addresses this work of remaking in five distinct, yet closely interwoven chapters: chapter 1 examines survivors’ response to domestic and international aid, arguing that it allowed Acehese survivors to position themselves as part of a world community, whilst distancing themselves from the Indonesian state. Against Fassin (2012), Samuels interprets survivors’ gratitude for humanitarian aid as a form of agency rather than as rendering them mute recipients, without going into much detail about its nature and extent. Chapter 2 engages with embodied narratives of the tsunami: people’s way of recounting their stories of the tsunami through their bodies and telling stories about their own and others’ bodies in the disaster. Chapter 3, which is particularly rich and engaging, examines the gendered ways in which remembering takes place and the role Islam plays in channelling and limiting memory of specific situations and preventing it from becoming overwhelming. Samuels discusses her interlocutors’ experience of local notions of ‘stress’ and ‘trauma’ as well as their cultivation of Islamic virtues in their grieving of grave personal losses. Piety here is not just an actively cultivated state, she argues, but also entails being acted upon. Based on this, chapter 4 engages with the politics

of memory in public spaces, official monuments, as well as 'everyday spaces' in which people experience and are affected by memory. Finally, chapter 5 addresses survivors' (largely Islamic) ideas of temporality as well as notions of personal improvement and a better future, which prevailed in the first years after the tsunami, and their intersection with the government's 'building back better' (p. 142) narrative.

*After the tsunami* provides a sensitive and deeply insightful account of the remaking of everyday life in post-tsunami Aceh through the experiences of individual subjects, which makes it a highly engaging read. At times, this emphasis on survivors' subjective narratives and the rather broad scope seem to prevent in-depth engagement with the historical context, which could drive some of the arguments further. In particular, readers might be interested to hear more about Aceh's 'other crisis' – the long-standing and violent conflict of rebels with the Indonesian government (cf. Drexler 2008), which ended after the tsunami – and how it plays into Samuels's interlocutors' conceptions of the pre-disaster 'everyday' and 'normality'. A closer examination of tsunami survivors' understanding of the relationship of Aceh as a Special Region with the Republic or an analysis of the intersection or distinctness of memory and trauma concerning tsunami and conflict (cf. Grayman, Good & Good 2009) could have been fruitful. Samuels touches on these issues, but in a rather cursory manner. Similarly, despite the crucial role of Islam, she does not discuss its specificities in Aceh. Her account of the politics of memory and people's relationship to it could be brought into productive dialogue with other accounts of memory politics in Indonesia (cf. McGregor 2007). While the relative lack of context is in part due to the author's analytical decision to focus on subjectivity, Samuels herself notes that '[i]n subjectivity, the individual and the social are always entangled' (p. 8).

Taken together, both books provide welcome contributions to anthropological studies of post-Reformasi Indonesia, albeit on different scales. While Strassler's monograph offers an excellent analysis of mediation in the Indonesian public sphere, Samuels's book compels with ethnographic detail and (private) disaster narratives of individual subjects.

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